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June
2006

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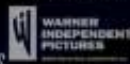
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A SCANNER DARKLY

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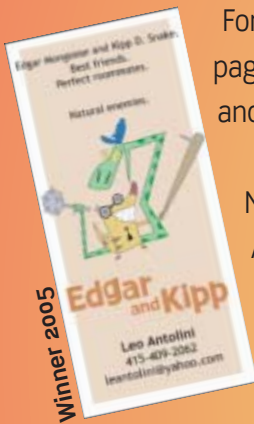
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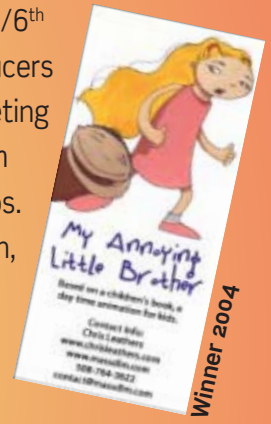
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ANIMATION MAGAZINE

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On the Cover: Jeffrey Katzenberg and his team at DreamWorks Animation are hoping that *Over the Hedge* will follow in the lucrative footsteps of *Shrek* and *Madagascar*.

E3 Cover: NovaLogic, the company behind *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, is on our E3 radar.

Correction: Eric Jeffery is the puppet lead at Tippet Studio who helped develop the fine CG canine effects featured in Disney's *The Shaggy Dog*. *The Venture Bros.* was created by Christopher McCulloch (a.k.a. Jackson Publick).



24



20



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36



"So are you guys psyched about the summer movie season yet?" asked a well-meaning industry exec at a recent tech event. I didn't know exactly how to respond, because on one hand, my colleagues and I are thrilled about the number of animated features and cool vfx-driven tent-poles coming to theaters in the next couple of months. On the other hand, like kids on Christmas Eve, we're pretending not to have high expectations, so we won't get too disappointed by the ones that don't deliver the goods.

This month, DreamWorks Animation officially kicks off the summer movie race with *Over the Hedge*. You can read Barbara Robertson's insightful cover story about the CG innovations of the feature in this issue. Next stop is *Cars*, the latest shiny package from John Lasseter and his brilliant team at Pixar, followed by *Superman Returns*, *A Scanner Darkly*, *Monster House*, *Barnyard*, *Everyone's Hero* and *Open Season*. Let's hope the summer audiences give each one of these movies the attention they deserve.

Last month, at the well-attended National Assoc. of Broadcasters confab in Vegas, the organization's president and CEO David K. Rehr pointed to the fact that although content is still king, everybody is watching the evolving distribution channels very closely. "Broadcast signals must be everywhere in the culture. Our future is a broadcast signal on every gadget—cell phones, laptops, PDAs—and of course multi-channels of DTV and digital radio."

At NAB, the dynamic folks at Nvidia showed us various high-end mobile phones on which you could watch hours of high-res animated content. Meanwhile, a few weeks ago, Fred Seibert and his team at Frederator Studios launched their daily vintage cartoon video podcast, while Channel Frederator celebrated its 100th cartoon airing. This is all fantastic news for toonheads, who can now enjoy classic shorts starring Bugs Bunny, Mighty Mouse, Felix the Cat, Daffy Duck and many others on the new platforms.

The beauty of all these great tech innovations is that we have even more ways to surround ourselves with animation. A good friend, who had to brave many hours of trans-Atlantic air travel recently told me that a poorly reviewed CG-animated movie saved her son from hours of ennui aboard a jet plane. Regardless of how much critics and purists may hate some recent toon releases, they are perfect for the restless minds of eight-year-olds. You can't expect every kids' movie to be *Pinocchio*, after all.

Ramin Zahed
Editor-in-Chief
rzahed@animationmagazine.net



Quote of the Month



"I just manage people the way I always wanted to be managed. That is, to be creatively challenged, but never to be told what to do."

— John Lasseter, Pixar/Disney Animation Studio's CCO, in a recent *Entertainment Weekly* interview.

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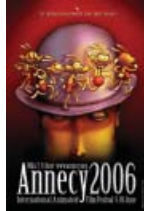
The Animation Planner

June

FRAME-BY-FRAME

3-11 Can you believe the brilliant organizers of the **Short Shorts Festival** in Japan? They've got plans for nine cities and 13 venues this year (www.shortshorts.org).

5-10 If you're a real toonhead, your bags are already packed for this year's wonderful **Annecy** animation festival and MIFA market in France (www.annecy.org).



6 You can escape the dog days of summer by stocking up on animated DVDs today. Titles hitting the shelves are **Beavis and Butt-Head: Mike Judge Collection Vol. 2**; **Dumbo: Big Top Edition**; **InuYasha Vol. 42**; **Godzilla: The Original Animated Series Vol. 1 and 2** and **What's New Scooby-Doo? Vol. 9**.

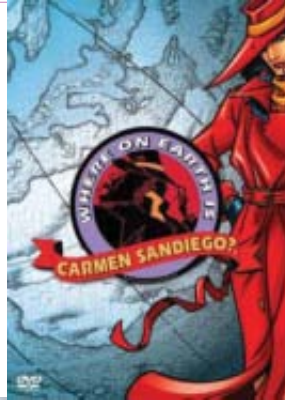


6-7 Los Angelinos will be focusing on the new tech content world at the **Digital Media Summit** (www.digitalmediasummit.com).

9 At long last, the CG-animated feature everyone's been waiting for: Director John Lasseter and Pixar's return to the big screen, **Cars**, opens wide in theaters today. [That's the next issue's cover story, folks!]



12-17 You can discover many interesting animated projects at this year's **Zagreb World Festival of Animated Film** (www.animafest.hr).



13 It's a good day to beef up on obscure titles on DVD as **The Golden Age of Cartoons: Aesop's Fables** and **The Complete Adventures of Cubby Bear** duke it out with **This Is America, Charlie Brown, Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego** and **Zatch Bell, Vol. 4**.

14-16 The future looks bright at the **Vancouver International Digital Festival** (www.vidfest.com).



16 It's the unofficial Jack Black day as the eccentric actor's latest project **Nacho Libre** hits the big screen. Black plays a priest who moonlights as a star of Mexican wrestling in this comedy directed by Jared Hess (*Napoleon Dynamite*).



20 If you're a big Warner Bros. Animation fan, then this is the day you've been saving up your hard-earned money for: Out on DVD are **Justice League: Season Two**, **Krypto the Superdog Vol. 1: Cosmic Canine**, **Superman: The Animated Series Vol. 3** and **Superman: Brainiac Attacks**. You can send your thank you notes to **Sander Schwartz**, the big cheese at the studio.

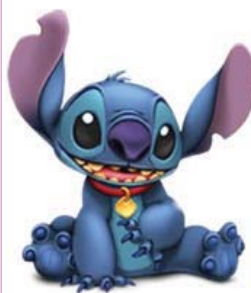


22 If toys ring your bell, you may want to attend **Licensing Int'l** (www.licensingshow.com) at the Javitz Center in New York.



22-23 Find out all kinds of interesting facts about financing toon projects and co-productions at the **Cartoon Master** event in Barcelona, Spain (www.cartoon-media.be).

23 Adam Sandler gets his hand on a magical universal remote in the fantasy comedy **Click**, directed by Frank Coraci. Also opening wide is Fox's CG-live-action mix, **Garfield's A Tale of Two Kitties**.



Stitch

27 Find out what the folks at Disney have planned for that cute blue alien created by Chris Sanders in the new direct-to-DVD release, **Leroy & Stitch**. The sequel will be competing with two hot anime titles **InuYasha Vol. 43** and **One Piece: Vol. 3** in stores today.

30 Up, up and away! It's time to put your red cape on and rush to see Bryan Singer's summer tentpole movie, **Superman Returns**.



To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail sgurman@animationmagazine.net

Books We Love

by Sarah Gurman

The Art of Cars

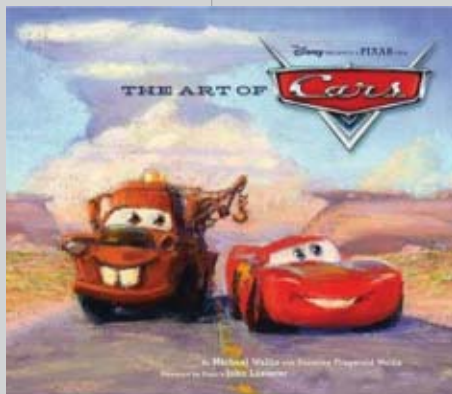
By Michael Wallis
with Suzanne Fitzgerald Wallis
(Chronicle Books, \$40)

In his poignant foreword to *The Art of Cars*, John Lasseter writes, "The spirit of Route 66 is in the details: every scratch on a fender, every curl of paint on a weathered billboard, every blade of grass growing up through a cracked street. Those details don't come for free in the computer—you have to create every single one." The Pixar team did more research for *Cars* than for any of their previous CG feature endeavors, and the meat of their recon came when the crew hit the open road. In addition to spectacular illustrations, a glimpse at the often-discussed Pixar creative process and informed prose from Route 66 buff Michael Wallis, *The Art of Cars* is imbued with the distinct spirit of excitement and wonder endemic to a bona fide road trip.

Through the book's pages, readers can relive Lasseter and co.'s travels as they visit auto shows in the original Motor City, Detroit,

feel the rush of the crowd at the Infineon Raceway and meander along Route 66. There's a lot to pick up about the company's successful creative process as the Pixar team observes the American landscape and devours chicken-fried steak and berry pies in the company of roadside regulars who inspired many of the movie's headlining characters.

This animation lover's dream volume is filled with reference photographs, evolving character sketches and sweeping pastel backgrounds, all assimilated to become the charismatic cartoon autos featured in the summer movie. You just can't help but be charmed by the development process which results in the creation of terrific car personalities like bumper sticker-bedecked VW van Fillmore and rusty old-school pick-up Mater. Dedicated to the late Joe Ranft who served as head of story on *Cars*, this beautiful process diary is a pleasure to read and will certainly get our motors running until the real thing rolls to theaters on June 4. ■



Laika Snaps Up Snow's Monsters

Portland-based Laika Entertainment is developing an animated feature based on author/illustrator Alan Snow's best-selling children's book series, *Here Be Monsters*. The book, which is currently a bestseller in the U.K., will be published Stateside this July by Simon and Schuster.

The first volume in a trilogy called *The Ratbridge Chronicles*, *Here Be Monsters* follows the adventures of a young boy named Arthur who is aided by his band of motley friends to fight Snatcher, a nasty villain who has taken over their town. Snow has illustrated more than 160 children's books throughout his career, penned the recent best-seller *How Santa Really Works*, designed a children's science museum in Japan, as well as a toy robot currently on sale worldwide.

Among Laika's other projects in development are the CG and stop-motion movie *Coraline* and the CG toon, *Jack & Ben's Animated Adventure*. The house's supervising director Henry Selick notes, "Like *Shrek*, *Here Be Monsters* is packed with multi-layered humor appealing to both child and adult audiences. It has a winning combination of the familiar elements of a boy's fight against evil, set in an extraordinary world, with a whimsical cast of characters." For more info, visit www.laika.com. ■



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NovaLogic Delivers More Realistic Battles

Games developed for next-generation consoles are certainly showing a marked difference in graphics quality right out of the gate, but it will be a while before we see developers fully exploiting the potential of the new machines. As we saw with PlayStation 2, Xbox and Game Cube offerings, the best-looking titles often come out late in the platform's life cycle. A good example is NovaLogic's upcoming **Black Hawk Down-Team Sabre**, which takes the battle to the lush jungles of Colombia and the high-desert regions of Iran and features perhaps the most realistic foliage ever seen in a PS2 game.

The *Black Hawk Down* franchise is also an example of a property that made money and got high marks from the gaming community. While games based on previously published material usually benefit from name recognition, gamers have learned to be leery of these titles because a lot of them have been rushed through production and don't offer anything



novel as far as gameplay goes.

Team Sabre keeps the war games fresh by introducing new single-player and multiplayer campaigns, allowing up to 32 players to compete online in seven unique game types, including variations of old classics. There are also new weapons, vehicles and troops. The addition of the British SAS force brings a touch of Blighty flavor to mix things up a bit, while expressive and detailed faces enhance the characters.

Overall, NovaLogic has managed to take a popular book and film title and build an interactive experience that stands on its own merit. If a licensed game can take on a life of its own and offer players something more than just a chance to "play the movie," it is more likely to enjoy sustained success. It is also more likely to earn the respect of the gaming community, which is inundated with big-budget publicity campaigns but has to seek out lower-profile gems like Sony's *God of War* and Majesco's *Psychonauts*. For more info, visit www.novalogic.com. ■

Hong Kong Express

If you're wondering about the booming Asian licensing sector, you'd be wise to make arrangements to attend the **Hong Kong Licensing Show** July 4th thru 6th this year. This well-attended event features licensing-themed events, an exhibition, conference and workshops as well as the third annual Premier Asian Licensing Awards. The show's organizer, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council is inviting more manufacturers, merchandisers and execs from the region to the growing confab. So pack your favorite Hello Kitty doll and find out about the next big toy craze in Asia before your competition does. For more info, visit www.hklicensing-show.com. ■



Funny Farm

Just when you thought the summer movie season couldn't get any busier comes news that Paramount plans to open Steve Oedekerk's much-anticipated CG-animated **Barnyard** on July 28. Originally scheduled for Oct. 6, the movie will now be sandwiched between Sony's *Monster House* (July 21) and Warner Bros.' *The Ant Bully* (August 4). The plot centers on Otis, a carefree cow (voiced by Kevin James) who learns a few things about growing up and acting responsibly. Sam Elliot, Rob Paulsen, Courteney Cox, Wanda Sykes and Danny Glover also lend their voices to this brightly colored toon. We have a feeling cartoonist Gary Larson (*The Far Side*), who specialized in drawing farm animals singing, dancing and talking when the humans were out of sight, is going to get a huge kick out of this one. ■



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Where For Art Thou, Gamers?

How can the game industry lift the financial pox on its house? **by Ryan Ball**

What goes up must come down. The old adage recently proved true for the video game industry as sales were down by 24% leading into the 2005 holiday season, which is typically a windfall period for game publishers. It wasn't long before major players such as Midway, Activision, Electronic Arts and Atari started laying off employees and ditching non-core franchises to cut costs and protect the bottom line. Suddenly, an industry that's all about thumb action started pointing fingers as everyone searched for answers. Call it the blame game. It's multiplayer.

One popular scapegoat cited by industry insiders and pundits is the forthcoming next-generation movement. Imagine the automobile industry announcing that next year they were introducing flying cars. How many people would rush out to their local Toyota dealership today and buy a brand new, blacktop-bound Corolla? Upgrading to the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 or Nintendo Revolution is going to require an investment of capital, and most of us have learned from childhood that you have to save up for the things you want. Suddenly the latest title in the *Lord of the Rings* franchise for PlayStation 2 isn't the highest priority.

Those waiting to get their hands on the PlayStation 3 will have to wait a bit longer since Sony announced that the release will be delayed until November. Still, if better graphics quality is the most impressive thing these new machines have to offer, it may not be enough to significantly influence the spending habits of young males and other potential players.

Next-gen anticipation may very well be playing a part in the game-sales slump, but the gamers themselves seem to be putting the blame on a market flooded with bad games. Read any online forum

dedicated to gaming and you'll find no shortage of posters berating the industry for churning out sub-par interactive experiences. If you thought Hollywood's batting average was bad, just look at the number of game titles released each year and consider the ratio of hits to misses. For every *Madden NFL '06* there are nearly a thousand games that, for some reason or another, failed to connect with button mashers. Never has a \$20 billion-a-year industry gotten it so wrong so often.

"All gamers want fresh experiences that stimulate them, entertain them and open their horizons," says Rob Kay, senior designer for Harmonix Music Systems, the company behind the smash hit game *Guitar Hero*. "Current non-gamers will only become gamers if we give them a damn good reason to do so. There are promising signs that our industry leaders realize this."

Kay believes Nintendo has been the boldest innovator. He says the company has demonstrated a commitment to changing the way we play by coming up with new, more natural ways to control games on the Nintendo DS handheld system and the Revolution console. He adds, "Microsoft also deserves some real credit for making online gaming accessible with Xbox 360. Both of these advances open up new ground for developers to explore. Props!"

According to Kay, the biggest missed opportunity in gaming innovation is new controllers. "A few years back, the console game industry seemed to conclude that games with bundled peripherals just don't sell. I'm sure there are plenty of examples to back that



rationale up, but the result has been an overdependence on the joystick," he says. "In order to keep joypads interesting we've been adding buttons like madmen. There are seventeen button inputs and two joysticks on my PlayStation 2 controller! That's ridiculous in a way that only the razor blade industry can match."

Citing Sony's *EyeToy* and Konami's *Dance Dance Revolution* as watershed advances, Kay posits that simplifying the human interface can give the video game business the proverbial health restoration it desperately needs. For *EyeToy*, Harmonix developed *Antigrav*, a hoverboarding game that has players control the character by moving their entire bodies rather than just their thumbs. But despite selling millions of units out of the gate, *EyeToy*, which tracks motion via a small set-top camera, remains a novelty that hasn't reached its full potential. As a result, gamemakers seem content to stick to their button-laden guns.

The NPD Group, a leading supplier of





Eric Zimmerman



Rob Kay

global consumer and retail information, recently released video game industry sales figures for March. The report showed total industry sales down 16% from the same period last year, while hardware sales dipped 31% and software took an 8% hit. For the year to date, total game revenues are down 5.6%, though hardware sales have stayed fairly steady,

due largely to the strength of portable gaming platforms such as Sony's PSP and Nintendo DS and Game Boy Advance. The console business, however, continues to struggle. The holiday-season introduction of the Xbox 360 promised to jumpstart business, but hardware shortages and software delays kept the product from making the immediate splash everyone was anticipating.

General game sales are sure to rebound, but the slump has revealed a weakness in the industry's ability to keep gamers interested in the usual fare and to draw new consumers into the fold. Though a number of first-person shooters, RPGs and sports titles have done extremely well, there have to be more options, says Eric Zimmerman, co-founder and CEO of independent developer and publisher gameLab.

"The game industry needs to work better to reach new audiences," Zimmerman insists. "Gamers have gotten older, and they don't have as much time to slog their way through epic, 40-hour games. The mainstream game industry is fighting bitterly for a shrinking audience, while more mass audiences await games that fit their lifestyles and interests."

According to Zimmerman, untapped audiences are falling by the wayside, being overlooked by publishers focused solely on certain demographics. He comments, "Between hardcore gamers (young males) and casual players (40-something females), there is a vast audience of people in their 20s and 30s. These people grew

up playing on their Atari 2600s and Super Nintendos, and they don't need to be convinced that games are a great way to spend leisure time. But they don't want to be an elf or a wizard 20 to 30 hours a week. These are the people who made *The Sims* the bestselling game of all time."

Zimmerman also likens the game biz to Hollywood, but notes one major difference. "The game industry is in desperate need of the equivalent of independent film; alternative ways for games to get funded, produced and distributed," he says. "There are some interesting movements in this regard, but nothing too significant just yet." He goes on to suggest that the mainstream game industry is in danger of creative stagnation as budgets soar, audiences shrink and original content becomes more and more scarce. "Solving this problem will mean addressing pressing questions of content, audience, technology, business and culture. That's a tall order, but with concerted effort, the game industry can dig itself out

of this rut we're in."

Eric Zimmerman will moderate an E3 panel discussion titled "The Inner Game: What goes into the industry's best-selling titles" on Wednesday, May 10, at 11:30 a.m. in Room 404AB of the Los Angeles



Convention Center. Rob Kay will participate in a panel discussion titled "Cracking the code of Creativity: Drawing novelty, awe and adventure from traditional genres," scheduled for Thursday, May 11, at 9:30 a.m. in room 404AB. ■

The Game is On at E3

Despite the newly drafted dress code for booth babes, The Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) is set to pack the Los Angeles Convention Center with more than 70,000 computer and game industry geeks eager to get their first glimpse of the latest titles and technologies. The 12th annual event kicks off on May 9, offering three days of informative conference programs and three days of whiz-bang show-floor presentations by leading electronic entertainment companies.

The Workshop program will include more than 175 video game industry experts exploring key issues facing the business. Attendees can choose from three conference tracks—"Creativity and Technology: Taking Control of the Next Generation of Gameplay," "Business Strategy: Embracing a New Set of Best Practices," and "Market Analysis: Understanding the New Digital Entertainment Landscape."

The art behind the games takes center stage in the third annual "Into the Pixel" exhibition, which will feature 16 works of video game art that have been selected by a panel of industry insiders and experts from world-class museums and galleries. The collection will then travel to other museums and exhibition venues. Great digital art also will be displayed in game demos as the major publishers show off their next-generation offerings. Though Sony has pushed the PlayStation 3 release back to November, the show promises to offer the most comprehensive look at what's in store for gamers as the new wave gains momentum.

E3 is put on each year by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), a U.S.-based organization dedicated to serving the business and public affairs needs of companies publishing interactive games for all platforms. For more information, go to www.e3expo.com or www.theesa.com.

—Ryan Ball



Seduced by Suburbia

Over the Hedge, DreamWorks Animation's adaptation of Michael Fry and T. Lewis' comic strip, kicks off the summer's big CG animated roller derby in grand eye-popping style.

by Barbara Robertson

FEATURE

Four years ago, when the team at DreamWorks Animation began working on the CG-animated adaptation of Michael Fry and T. Lewis' charming comic strip, few could predict that the summer of 2006 was going to be such a competitive season! As *Over the Hedge* officially opens the mad derby known as the summer blockbuster season, many future animation jobs will rely on how well the movie performs in a period packed with tent-pole releases, family fare and CG-animated thoroughbreds.

Directed by Tim Johnson (*Antz*, *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*) and Karey Kirkpatrick (whose numerous screenplay credits include *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Rescuers Down Under*, *Chicken Run* and the upcoming *Charlotte's Web*), and produced by Bonnie Arnold (*Tarzan*, *Toy Story*), the feature centers on a comedic pack of

wild animals who are slowly seduced by the comforts of suburbia.

In the comic, a wily raccoon named RJ and a sensitive turtle named Verne

share wry observations about the human world, a viewpoint mirrored by the filmmakers who decided to create a prequel for the comic strip. "We wondered how on Earth did Verne and RJ become friends," says Johnson. "We came up with the idea of a naïve group of animals set upon by a con man."

In the movie, the con man is RJ (who is voiced by Bruce Willis), of course. When he happens across a hungry group of guillible animals, he convinces them to help him steal food from people in a housing development on the other side of the hedge. "We eat to live," RJ says as the camera catches vi-





gnettes of people chowing down. "They live to eat."

Verne (Garry Shandling) is cautious, but it's too late. RJ fed cheese-flavored chips to the group, Ozzie (William Shatner), a melodramatic possum, and his daughter Heather (Avril Lavigne), Stella (Wanda Sykes), a skunk, Hammy (Steve Carell) a hyperactive squirrel, and a cute porcupine family. They're all addicted.

DreamWorks' Glendale, Calif. facility created the film with one lighting team and an animation team at PDI in Redwood City lending a hand via the studio's videoconferencing system; 237 artists worked on the film. It's the first time the Glendale studio used PDI's full proprietary pipeline.

"We were able to lift a lot of elements from PDI and drop them into *Hedge*," says Craig Ring, visual effects supervisor. That included rigs from *Madagascar* and trees and fur software from *Shrek's* Puss 'N

Boots.

The characters in *Hedge* are cartoony, although not as extreme as *Madagascar's* menagerie. "The big difference was in having a large number of fuzzy characters," says Jason Reisig, one of five supervising animators on the project, who worked on *Antz*, *Shrek*, *Spider-Man 2* and *Madagascar*. "During animation, they look like hairless, skinny creatures. Later, they puff up and become furry after rendering."

Animators worked with 300 facial controls and between 500 and 700 body controls. For blocking and working quickly, animators used stripped down character rigs. Puffy versions of the models helped them approximate final silhouettes. After final rendering, RJ had nearly two million hairs, the fuzzy squirrel had over three million and the bear topped four million. A "hug quota" kept the animators' temptation to have characters touching each other in check.



(from left to right) Tim Johnson, Bonnie Arnold and Karey Kirkpatrick

"We wanted to have characters putting their hands on their hips, rubbing their hands together, hugging, but it costs too much money for the effects department to massage all that hair contact," says Reisig. Because the digital fur didn't know when it was hitting other fur, it didn't flatten automatically.

In addition to the animals, the *Hedge* team created 23 humans, notably Gladys

FEATURE



(Allison Janney) the president of the homeowners' association, the "Verminator" (Thomas Haden Church) who is Gladys' anti-pest solution, and a group of girl guides selling cookies. But the story belongs to the animals.

Because the film is told from the animals' point of view, the camera is always at critter height; anything taller than the animals is an up shot. "We took a field trip to an area north of Indianapolis where there is a housing development on one side of the street and woods on the other," says Kathy Altieri, production designer. "We crawled on our bellies through the woods and took pictures."

All told, the woodland has 70 different types of trees and plants that the crew multiplied into 337 trees and 1,350 shrubs. To build the hedge that separates the burbs from the woods, they used a procedural toolkit that grew around 25 million leaves on a box. The goal was to mimic an ivy-covered, three-story parking structure on the DreamWorks lot. "It's a perfect blend of real leaves on an unnaturally giant, straight shape," says Ring.

In the woodland, sunshine dapples the leaves, and flowers bob their heads, but the look of the suburb changes to reflect the animals' emotional reactions. When RJ makes

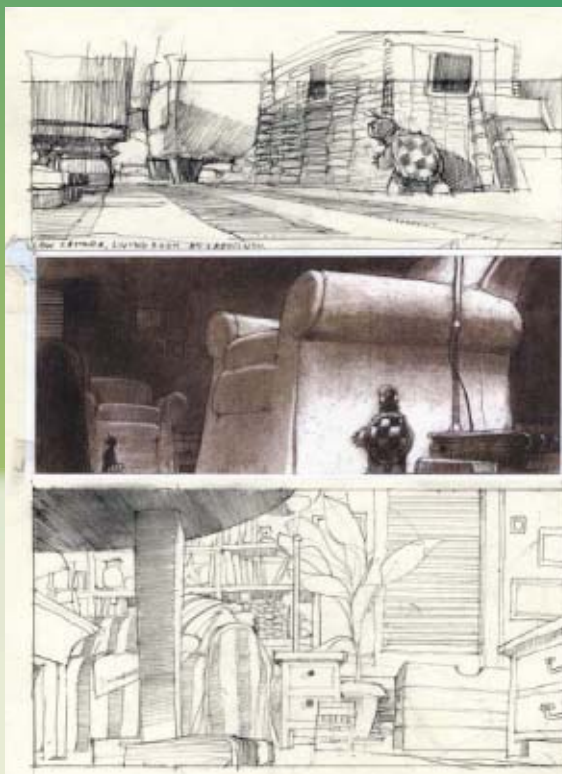
his "land of opportunity" pitch, the suburbs look like the Bellagio with colored lights in the sprinklers, but the neighborhood turns harsh when Verne pays a visit.

Modelers used the same tricks as real suburban tract developers—every house is a variation of one plan. They exaggerated the scale in the kitchen, though, and painters used the studio's proprietary 3D paint system to create texture maps for the streets, to foster the illusion of tiny animals living in a big world.

Particle simulations created in Maya and rendered using a proprietary renderer added what Ring calls "story effects." When Hammy moves fast, a heat ripple that looks like a vapor trail from an airplane follows him; when the critters taste chips for the first time, the flavor blows them backwards. "The story effects fit the over the top style of the movie," says Ring. "They're silly and cartoony."

The most distinguishing difference in the way this film looks, though, was Johnson's choice to imitate photographic techniques. "I'm passionate about photography," he says. "Animation is almost the opposite aesthetic: It's based on adding illustrations to a blank canvas. With photography, you make subtractive choices: You start with the world and crop things out; you choose what's in focus."

Depth mattes helped Johnson know what to throw out of focus. "A lot of the time, only the characters are in focus," says Ring. "We used shallow focus, but rather than a normal Gaussian blur,



the way traditional CG pushes out of focus, we used a lens-defocusing model to get circles of confusion with crisp edges. It's blurry, but with a specific kind of blurriness. It isn't a technical breakthrough, but we're able to control where people are looking." Lighters also used global illumination and rim lights on the characters to help create a filmic look. In addition, the crew rendered the film using algorithms that mimic film's linear response to light.

"Our mantra became, 'Let us tell you that you went too far,'" says Kirkpatrick. "And they rarely did. I think the look is stunning. It's almost like seeing 3D for the first time." ■

DreamWorks Animation's *Over the Hedge* opens in theaters nationwide on May 19.



Craig Ring



Jason Reisig



Kathy Altieri





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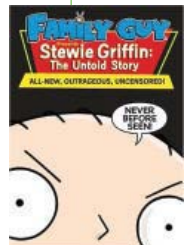
Collector-friendly sets of animated TV shows and direct-to-DVD movies continue to feed home viewer appetites in 2006.

Although in recent months, home entertainment industry money crunchers have reported a 1.2% drop in sales compared to the same quarter in 2005, the animation picture continues to be bright in the months ahead. Titles such as *Bambi II*, *Barbie Mermaidia*, *Lady and the Tramp: 50th Anniversary Edition* and *Aloha, Scooby-Doo!* have been performing well on the DVD charts week after week. According to The Digital Entertainment Group, consumers spent \$22.8 billion renting and buying DVDs in 2005, an 8% increase over the healthy sales the industry saw in 2004. Keep in mind that box office sales dropped 6.2% in 2005 to \$8.84 billion. So what does this mean for distributors that have hot animated titles in the pipeline? We caught up with some of the field's power players to get the skinny on their slates and their thoughts on the next big things:



Steve Feldstein
SVP, Marketing and
Corporate
Communications,
Twentieth Century
Fox Home
Entertainment

Leaders of the Pack: "We have released three volumes of the pop culture phenomenon



Family Guy, which consistently rests in the top spots on the TV DVD best-seller charts and prompted Fox to return the cancelled series to its Animation Domination lineup. In 2006, we released *Family Guy Presents Stewie Griffin: The Untold Story*, which was the top-selling animated made-for-DVD release of the year and remains on the weekly best-seller list six months after its debut. Additionally, our animated kid's titles, including *Strawberry Shortcake* and *The Roach Approach*, continue to way over-perform at retail."

Animated DVD Appeal: "Parents can rest

assured that animated family titles like *Strawberry Shortcake* and *The Roach Approach* will provide their children wholesome entertainment with maximum repeatability whereas adult animation appeals to the core fan, who will also watch the DVD over and over to discover hidden innuendoes which may have gone unnoticed the first time around."

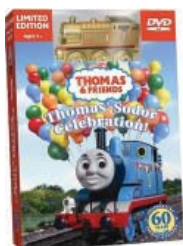
Releases to Watch for: "In 2006, Animation and Visual Effects fans can look forward to the DVD releases of *American Dad Season 1*, as well as *Ice Age: The Meltdown* and the online serialized adventure, *Broken Saints*." Also, start saving if Fox's *Dr. Dolittle 3* and *Like Mike 2* will tickle your home entertainment fancy.

Personal Faves: *Fight Club*, *The Sound of Music* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.



Jamie Cygielman
SVP Consumer
Products, HIT
Entertainment

Leaders of the Pack: "In 2005, to commemorate *Thomas & Friends'* 60th anniversary, HIT released *Thomas' Sodor Celebration* (street date: March 8, 2005), *Songs from the Station* (street date: May 3, 2005) and *Thomas & Friends Calling All Engines!* (street date: Sept. 6, 2005), the first full-length feature in the brand's history. *Thomas & Friends*, narrated by a storyteller and created in a "live-action animation" style designed to give the Island of Sodor a unique trackside intimacy, invites children to enter a world of imagination through the tracks of a train and the words of a story. All of the adven-



tures of *Thomas & Friends* encourage timeless life lessons such as discovery, friendship and cooperation."

Animated DVD Appeal: "At HIT, preschool is our world...and children love to watch their favorite characters, including HIT's *Thomas & Friends*, *Bob the Builder*, and *Angelina Ballerina* over and over again. Animation—in all of its varied styles—has a unique way of connecting with children. For example, *Bob the Builder*, created in stop-frame animation, features a variety of vehicles, such as Scoop the back-hoe loader, Dizzy the cement mixer and Muck the dump truck. Through stop-frame, these 'vehicles' are given personalities and a range of emotions, making them accessible to children and stimulating their imaginations."

Releases to Watch for: "HIT Entertainment, via distributor 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, will be releasing several new titles in 2006, including *Bob the Builder: Built to be Wild* (street date: Sept. 26, 2006), a full-length musical special created in stop-frame animation and the animated *Angelina Ballerina: All Dancers on Deck* (street date: Sept. 12, 2006)."

Personal Faves: "I'm a big fan of TV on DVD. As for my three-year-old son, his favorite DVD is *Barney: Let's Play School* from Barney's Classic Collection."



Michael Rathouser
VP of Marketing,
Family
Entertainment,
Lions Gate

Leaders of the Pack: "As a company, we have been very fortunate in that we have had many different successful animated releases to date—both in the feature-length category and in the television episodic category. Our most recent success is the first-ever animated movie from Marvel—*Ultimate Avengers: The Movie*, which we released on DVD and UMD in February. The film is the first in a series of animated features we are working on that bring the most popular Marvel characters to animation in a way that stays true to their comic book roots."

Animated DVD Appeal: "I think the success is due to the fact that there are two key constituencies that love animated movies. A large part of



the fan-base for animated products tends to be kids, and as we know, kids like to watch a favorite show over and over. In that context, DVDs naturally do well because of their repeatability factor. But it's also important to note that there is another key audience in the adult fans of animation who enjoy collecting their favorite shows on DVD. Furthermore, elements like unique packaging and bonus features enhance the collectibility of those shows or movies on DVD."

Releases to Watch for: "We are extremely excited about a couple of new releases we have coming up this fall. As a key component of its 30th anniversary year, we are releasing the first-ever Arthur movie—*Arthur's Missing Pal*—as a DVD premiere in August. It has an all-new CGI animated look that we think will excite fans of the Arthur television and book series. The production has been in very close collaboration with Marc Brown, and it's a wonderful, adventurous detective story with an all-family appeal."

Additionally, on the heels of the success of *Ultimate Avengers: The Movie* comes *Ultimate Avengers 2*, the sequel which features some of Marvel's best-known heroes like Captain America, Hulk, Iron Man and—for the first time ever in animation—Black Panther. The film takes place

in the jungles of Wakanda, which is Black Panther's home in Africa, and it is jam-packed with incredible action scenes that could only be done in animation. All Marvel and animation fans will love this film, which will be available this August!"

Personal Faves: "My favorite animated DVDs are *Finding Nemo*, *The*

Care Bears: Journey to Joke-a-Lot and *Ultimate Avengers: The Movie*."



Nancy Wolpert
VP, Home
Entertainment
Nickelodeon and
Viacom Consumer
Products

Leaders of the Pack: "*Dora's Pirate Adventure* (Released January 2004)—As the first "never-before-seen" double length musical adventure premiering on DVD featuring Dora, the Latina heroine from Nick Jr.'s top-rated preschool TV show—Dora fans were able to experience a brand new story with great music on DVD. After more than two years, this title is still selling

strongly in stores and launched our annual series of Dora DVD premieres.

Avatar Book 1 Volume 1 (Released January 2006): The first DVD release of our top rated anime-inspired series. Avatar fans were thrilled to be able to experience the rich deep layers of the Avatar legend with its compelling characters and epic storytelling presented with feature-film quality animation.

South Park Season 7 (Released March, 2006): This DVD franchise based upon the successful, recent Peabody Award-winning TV show continues to sell well with every seasonal release and shows no sign of slowing down.

The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie (Released March, 2005): The most watched animated show ever to hit the big screen and then became a huge hit on DVD. Kids and adults enjoyed watching this epic adventure (mix of live action and animation) with a great soundtrack as well as DVD exclusive special features, including the movie animatic and the sneak peek of a special SpongeBob video game."

Animated DVD Appeal: "Nickelodeon's animated titles have been popular because they appeal to a broad audience. Both kids and adults are attracted to this art form. With today's continually changing technology, animation is becoming more exciting and unusual. There is so much to experience. And with DVDs, especially, we can include great insights behind the scenes, backgrounds and interviews with creators, which is appealing to the animation fan."

Releases to Watch for: "*Avatar Book 1 Box Set* (Release Fall, 2006): This amazing set will have incredible exclusive special features that will further enhance the Avatar experience and delight show fans. Have to stay in touch to learn more! *SpongeBob Season 4 Vol. 1* (Release Fall, 2006): New episodes from the 4th season plus special features that we can't announce yet! Also keep an eye out for the nature-revealing direct-to-DVD release of *Go Diego Go! - The Great Dinosaur Rescue*."

Personal Faves: "*Dora Pirate Adventure*—I am a true adult fan of this show and this particular episode. The music is great. *Ren & Stimpy The Complete First and Second Seasons Uncut* (Released Oct., 2004): How can you not love this groundbreaking animation presented as John K

meant for it to be seen?. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: Total opposite end of the spectrum but I can enjoy the fun and elegance of New York in the 1960s as only Audrey Hepburn can do."

Dorinda Marticorena
VP Kids and Sports Marketing, Warner Home Video

Leaders of the Pack: "We at WHV are fortunate to have a terrific and large portfolio of animation to distribute. First, we segment animation between Collector/Adult targeted content and Kids/Family. On the Collector side, our crown jewel is our *Looney Tunes Golden Collections*, which have consistently been in the top 20 titles of episodic non-theatrical sales since we began to release them in 2003. We also do very well with DC Comics Classic boxed sets (cartoons produced prior to 1992) and Hanna-Barbera boxed sets. Through our Rankin & Bass acquisition, we have also seen great success with the original *Thundercats* series on DVD. On the Kids side, we have seen enormous success with *Scooby-Doo*, kids-targeted DC content such as *Teen Titans*, *Tom & Jerry* and distributed lines such as *Leap Frog*, *American Girl*, *Hot Wheels* and *Cartoon Network Originals*."

Animated DVD Appeal: "When done well, they have mass appeal. Looney Tunes animation is considered among the best ever produced both for brilliant writing, direction and animation. Cartoons from the 40's still resonate with today's audiences. As for Hanna Barbera properties, parents grew up with Scooby, Yogi, etc. and so know these characters and trust them to entertain their families—which translates into strong DVD sales for WHV."

Releases to Watch for: "*Thundercats Season 2, Volume 1* (April), *Samurai Jack Season 3* (May), *What's New Scooby-Doo? Volume 6* (June), *Justice League Season 2* (June), *Superman The Animated Series Volume 3* (June), *Krypto Volume 1* (June), *Superman in Brainiac Attacks* (June), *Ani-maniacs Volume 1* and *Pinky and the Brain Volume 1* (July)."

Personal Faves: "*The Wizard of Oz* and *Looney Tunes Golden Collection Volume 1*." ■

—Compiled by Sarah Gurman



Spring Forward

We all know that primetime TV can become a great wasteland after the May sweeps. That's why it's important to stock up on cool animated DVDs in the next two months. Here are a few top-notch releases that should keep a smile on our faces during the dog days of summer and beyond.

Home Movies: Season Four [Shout Factory, \$34.98]

Yes, it's true. All great things come to an end. That's why the release of the fourth and final season of Brendon Small's awesome *Home Movies* series is a bittersweet event. The show, which has been a fixture on Cartoon Network's [adult swim] for several years centers on third-grade filmmaker Brendon Small, his pals Melissa and Jason and his soccer coach, who's not a fan of kids or soccer! Many believe that the 13 episodes featured in the fourth season are some of the best in the series. In this collection, Brendon goes to music camp, where he meets lousy counselors played by They Might Be Giants, he shoots a movie un-



derwater, pays homage to Hitchcock, works on a disastrous rock opera called "The Wizard's Baker" and fights with his demons in an episode called "Those Bitches Tried to Cheat Me!"

In addition to fan commentaries by cult faves such as The Shins, Modest Mouse and the staff of the humor zine *The Onion*, the DVD comes with a music CD containing the best songs from the four seasons. The package should keep all of us fans happy until Small's new series *Death Clock Metalocalypse*

(about a Scandinavian death metal band which is charged with saving the world) premieres on Cartoon Network this August.

Samurai Jack: Season 3 [Turner, \$29.98]

It's hard to find an animated series that receives as much admiration and unbridled enthusiasm from toon fans as



Genndy Tartakovsky's multi-Emmy and Annie-winning *Samurai Jack*. And it's easy to understand why. It's beautifully drawn, has wonderful storylines and is both entertaining and highly atmospheric. In the third season of the show, our favorite time-traveling samurai (voiced by Phil LaMarr) finds himself continuing his battles with the evil shape-shifting master, Aku (voiced by Mako). The DVD features episodes 27 through 39, including "Chicken Jack," "The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful," "Jack in Egypt," "Jack and the Labyrinth" and "The Birth of Evil," an almost-Jack-less outing in which we learn about Aku's past.

Paired with the Season 1 and 2, this DVD is a true collector's dream.

X-Men: Evolution: The Complete Third Season [Warner Bros., \$19.98]

Fans of Marvel's *X-Men* series are holding their collective breath, wondering how live-action director Brett Ratner of *Rush Hour* fame will follow up the excellent two first outings directed by Bryan Singer. Until the movie comes out later this month, we can jog our memories with the 2-DVD set featuring the complete third season of the animated *X-Men: Evolution* (originally aired on Kids' WB! in 2002 and 2003). Targeting a younger audience, the series follows the adventures of Cyclops, Jean Grey, Nightcrawler, Rogue, Shadowcat, Wolverine, Beast and Storm from the original comic book as well as Spyke, a



Top Animated Titles

1. Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children (Sony)
2. Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit (DreamWorks)
3. South Park: 7th Season (Paramount)
4. Chicken Little (Disney)
5. Robot Chicken, Vol. 1 (Warner Bros.)
6. Howl's Moving Castle (Disney)
7. Barbie Mermaidia (Lions Gate)
8. Lady and the Tramp: 50th Anniv. Ed. (Disney)
9. Dinosaurs: 1st and 2nd Season (Disney)
10. Justice League: Season One (Warner Bros.)



Source: Amazon.com 4/11/06

new character created specifically for the show. The characters are seen as teenagers attending (and getting thrown out of) high school and going to the Xavier Institute. Many of the storylines deal with overcoming hatred, intolerance and racism. In the season finale, the powerful mutant Apocalypse is finally liberated from captivity. In case the Ratner movie sucks, we'll always have the toons to warm our hearts.

Beavis and Butt-Head, Vol. 2: Mike Judge Collection [Paramount, \$38.99]

Mike Judge's brainless wonders, the bad boys of MTV, Beavis and Butt-Head, are back for another collection of their animated antics. The first DVD volume of the Mike Judge collection, however, made a lot of fans angry because the "director's cuts" were actually edited and shorter than the originals (for copyright and legal reasons, we believe!). The good news is that 40 classic episodes are included in this 226-minute collection. Details



are still murky, but we'll keep you posted! By the way, if you're playing Trivial Pursuit, remember that Beavis is the one in the Metallica T-

shirt and Butt-Head is the one in the AC/DC shirt and their hobbies include nose picking, head banging, making fun of videos and breaking stuff! Come to think of it, we loved these boys so much, that we put someone in the White House who's just like them!

Dumbo (Big Top Edition) [Disney, \$29.98]

It's amazing what a clean digital face-lift can do for a cute baby elephant with big ears. Yes, Disney's 1941 classic tale of the

perky pachyderm with a penchant for flying will look magnificent in this new DVD edition. Directed by Ben Sharpsteen, from a story by Helen Aberson and Harold Pearl, the movie is only 64-minutes long, but it packs quite an emotional

punch. The DVD also comes with Disney-Pedia: My First Circus Game, Sing-Along Songs, a Baby Mine music video performed by Jim Brickman and Kassie DePai-



va, the bonus shorts *Elmer Elephant* and *The Flying Mouse* and a featurette titled *Celebrating Dumbo*. By the way, if you want to hear an amazing version of the Oscar-winning *Baby*

Mine song, check out Bonnie Raitt's version on a Disney collection called *Stay Awake*. Simply unforgettable.

Superman: Brainiac Attacks [Warner Bros., \$19.98] Krypto the Superdog Vol. 1: Cosmic Canine [Warner Bros., \$14.98]

Only those trapped in a '50s-era bomb shelter would be oblivious to the fact that this is the summer of *Superman Returns*, the much-anticipated return of the DC Comics hero to the big screen. That's



Top VFX Titles

1. King Kong (Universal)
2. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (Warner Bros.)
3. The Chronicles of Narnia (Disney)
4. Firefly: Complete Series (Fox)
5. Underworld: Evolution (Sony)
6. Kingdom of Heaven (Fox)
7. Aeon Flux (Paramount)
8. Star Wars: Episode III (Fox)
9. Back to the Future Trilogy (Universal)
10. Battlestar Galactica: Season 2.0 (Universal)



Source: Amazon.com 4/11/06

why we think it's the perfect time to play catch-up at home with two related Warner Bros. DVDs, until the Bryan Singer movie hits the screens on June 30.

The new direct-to-DVD feature *Superman: Brainiac Attacks* promises to be a great tie-in with the movie. Based on the *Superman* animated series from the late 1990s, the project reunites Tim Daly and Dana Delany who provided the voices for Superman and Lois Lane for the Warner Bros. toon. The plot surrounds a nefarious plan hatched up by Lex Luthor and Brainiac, as well as the key relationship between the Man of Steel and his main gal, roving reporter Lois.

For die-hard fans, there's also a new DVD featuring part of the first season of the Warner Bros. series *Krypto the Superdog*. The show centers on the sharp canine creature from Krypton and his earth buddies Ace the Bathound and Streaky the Supercat. Directed by Scott Jeralds and overseen by Paul Dini and Alan Burnett, this colorful offering is a wonderful companion to the other darker-hued adventures of the all-American crime fighter. It's also a good way of keeping those younger fans happy who may not be ready for the movie's more mature content. ■



—Ramin Zahed



Something to Crow About

Keiichi Sato's acclaimed series *Karas: The Prophecy* spreads its wings in America.

by Patrick Drazen

We may have been here before: Tokyo is plagued by a host of evil spirits, and a lone warrior has to set things right in *Karas: The Prophecy*, a six-part animated series released by Manga Entertainment in April. But this time around, there are some huge differences.

For one thing, "here" never looked quite like this. The mix of 2D and CG animation is almost seamless, reflecting the current trends in anime seen in features such as *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*. Director Keiichi Sato also toggles between the ordinary Tokyo—what he calls "the

organic street of Japan"—and the spirit realm.

The plot may seem like fantasy or superstition in the west, but even 21st century Japanese live with beliefs that Shinto, Japan's native religion, has taught for centuries. "I have a grasp on the fact that (ghosts, phantoms, demons and monsters) coexist with us and keep the boundary of the human world in balance," Sato says. They cause "mysterious, outrageous and sometimes wonderfully life-affirming events."

Sato was a good choice to direct, in part based on his previous work as a key animator for the Aoki Ryusei



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SPT Layzner television series and as character designer for, both seasons of *The Big O*, Part 1 of *Ninja Resurrection* and Part 4 of the long-running horror/adult anime *Urotsukidoji*. One more detail: Sato was born in 1965, the same year Tatsunoko Production opened its doors. The Japanese animation house produced and released *Karas* to celebrate the studio's 40th anniversary.

Tatsunoko was the brainchild of the three Yoshida brothers. The family lived in Kyoto until oldest brother Tatsuo's comics grew in popularity. He moved to Tokyo to be at the center of the publishing action, hired some assistants, then brought his brothers in to help manage things. The younger brothers also brought the American superhero comics they'd gotten from Occupation soldiers after World War 2; these inspired a number of the anime projects they would later produce.

Tatsunoko's first animated project, *Space Ace*, arrived in 1965, and since then the studio with the seahorse logo has created some major anime titles, even a few works that got released in the States. Tatsunoko created three seasons of *Gatchaman* (also known as *Battle of the Planets*), and *Mach Go Go Go* (classic anime *Speed Racer*). Their output ranges from

The Flying House (a Bible-based kiddie cartoon) to *Samurai Pizza Cats*.

Karas: The Prophecy, however, is miles away from most of Tatsunoko's other works. Writer Shin Yoshida, who also worked on the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* television series, looked to America's more recent, angst-ridden superheroes such as the latest incarnation of Batman for inspiration. "I thought it was about time Japan had its own negative, dark hero," he says. In this case, things get too dark, as Eko, a *Karas* (a knight who keeps the peace between the real and spirit worlds), loses his commitment to his work; he allows poltergeists to cross over into the real Tokyo to wreak havoc. An immortal young girl named Yurine recruits a spirit named Nue to put on the armor and take on Eko.

The name *Karas* is from *karasu*, the Japanese word for crow. Not just any crow, though; the *karasu tengu* is a crow-spirit with a lengthy history in Japan. These malicious demons meddle in human affairs, have a weird sense of humor and love causing chaos. Eko probably wasn't the first *Karas* to switch sides.

For the U.S. DVD release Manga Entertainment, the Chicago-based company (now part of IDT Entertainment) which brought *Ghost in the Shell*, *Ninja Scroll* and *Perfect Blue* to

America, is releasing the first three episodes this spring, and the rest in September. They also tapped voice actors with solid Generation Y credentials but no anime experience. Jay Hernandez, of *Ladder 49* and *Crazy/Beautiful*, voices Nue, the new *Karas* recruited by Yurine. She's voiced by Piper Perabo, who's been in *Coyote Ugly* and the two *Cheaper by the Dozen* films. Their nemesis, Eko (who has been protecting Tokyo since it was founded over four centuries ago), has the voice of Matthew Lillard, best known as homicidal Stuart in *Scream* and as Shaggy in the *Scooby Doo* movies.

With cutting-edge CGI, an apocalyptic story and clean Hollywood dubbing, this *Karas* looks like a crow with solid wings. ■

Manga's *Karas: The Prophecy* DVD (\$19.98) is now available in stores. The DVD features both English and Japanese versions (with English subtitles), behind-the-scenes footage, original concept art, Japanese trailers and TV spots and interviews with Japanese voice actors, director and producers, as well as an exclusive mini-comic from Dark Horse Comics.



High-Pitched American Idols

Chipmunks Make the World Go Round on DVD.

by Ramin Zahed



Ross Bagdasarian Jr., his wife, Janice Karman and their clan at home.

so we got to cool off in the hot months!"

Chipmunks' fans will also be happy to know that a new feature about the boys is in development at 20th Century Fox. As Bagdasarian Jr. notes, "The 50th anniversary is coming up in two years. We are hoping to have the movie ready by then." The script, penned by *The Simpsons* veteran Jon Vitti explores the origins of the characters, focusing on how confirmed bachelor David Seville ends up raising the singing animals. "We're really happy with the script because it has that sophisticated comedy that will appeal to both kids and parents, just like *Shrek* and *Ice Age*. The TV series was on the air back in the '80s, so a lot of viewers who grew up with the show are now parents and will be able to enjoy the movie with their own kids." According to him, the feature will be a mix of live-action and CG animation—for the chipmunks, we're sure!

So why does he think the musical squirrels (Yes, a chipmunk is a kind of squirrel!) have had such amazing impact on pop culture? "My dad created three amazing archetypes," muses Bagdasarian Jr. "Alvin is like Lucy (*I Love Lucy*), Bart Simpson and Dennis the Menace... He's willful and questions the voice of authority. Kids love to see that kind of gumption and determination. My wife and I fleshed out the other two as well: Simon wasn't just the nerdy smart guy and Theodore had more to do than be the fat giggler. Simon became the voice of reason, a Spock-like character who also has that Noel Coward urbane wit. Theodore has the baby-of-the-family personality, the most emotional and the most lovable."

Of course, in addition to their numerous animated incarnations and adventures, the Chipmunks had a great knack for selling hit records! They always sang in every episode of their animated series, sold over 43 million records, won five Grammys and earned over a dozen Gold and Platinum records. We're hoping that Bagdasarian Jr. will get them a judging gig on *American Idol* next season! ■

Paramount Home Entertainment releases *The Chipmunk Adventure* on DVD (\$14.99) on May 23. For more info, visit www.thechipmunks.com.

It's been a while since we last heard of David Seville and his trio of singing chipmunks, Alvin, Simon and Theodore. The popular creations of the late Ross Bagdasarian, which started their careers as novelty singers in the late '50s (*Witch Doctor*, *The Chipmunk Song*) and branched out into TV stardom with specials and series such as *A Chipmunk Christmas*, *The Alvin Show* and *Alvin and the Chipmunks* have been out of the public eye for a few years. We're glad to report that the timeless gang makes a comeback on DVD as Paramount and Bagdasarian

Productions release the 1987

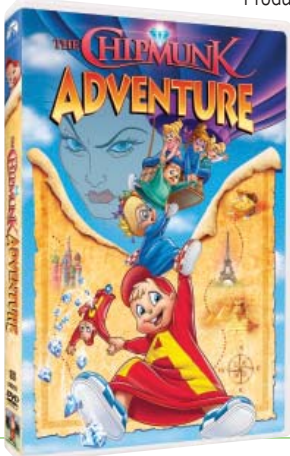
feature *The Chipmunk Adventure* this month.

Produced and written by Ross Bagdasarian Jr., son of the original creator, and directed by his wife, Janice Karman, the feature finds the dynamic trio competing in a hot-air balloon race around the world

against the Chipettes (Brittany, Jeanette and Eleanor). Things get complicated when they realize that the race is an elaborate front for a pair of shady diamond smugglers!

"We went back to the original 35 mm negative and worked with a beautiful High Def transfer of the film," says Bagdasarian Jr., who took over as the voice of the Chipmunks after his father's death in 1972. "Because the movie has so many great songs plus a score by the Royal Philharmonic, it was important to make the DVD sound really good too, so we have a phenomenal 5.1 surround sound audio. We also included a gallery of spectacular art, including rare pencil sketches, storyboard panels and backgrounds and cel images."

Bagdasarian Jr., who works closely with his wife to keep the brand fresh and original through the years, has fond memories, as a young boy, watching his dad in action. "I saw him do *Witch Doctor* and *The Chipmunk Song* on *The Ed Sullivan Show*," he says. "I loved what my dad did. We grew up in the San Fernando Valley, and it gets very hot in the summer. His success meant that we got a swimming pool,



The Samurai Critic:

Reviews of this month's hot new anime titles on DVD



Illustration by Pres Romanillos

HOME ENTERTAINMENT

by Charles Solomon

Magic, like greatness, is thrust upon some characters; How they handle the gift determines whether the result is comedy or drama.

Yuri Shibuya, the hero of *Kyo Kara Maoh!*, is a nerdy, well-intentioned high school student who loves baseball. When he goes to a neighborhood park, a gang of thugs shoves him into a toilet—which transports him to a parallel world where he's hailed as the long-awaited Demon King. Yuri is a familiar anime type: the unimpressive guy whose inherent kindness and nobility win the day. And initially all Yuri has going for him is his good nature, although his latent magical powers slowly manifest themselves. He not only has to learn to be a king, he has to adjust to life in the quirky Great Demon Realm. He slaps a young noble named Wolfram in response to an insult—and wins him as a fiancé. When Yuri complains they're both boys, his councilors blithely respond, "That's not unusual here."

An agreeable mixture of comedy and fantasy, *Kyo Kara Maoh!* sometimes rambles. There are a lot of disgruntled nobles in the alternate world, and most of them hold some sort of grudge against Yuri's Demon Kingdom. But Yuri is always an engaging hero-in-spite-of-himself.

Many series lose energy and momentum in their second season; *Fullmetal Alchemist* only grows more compelling.

Edward and Alphonse Elric inherit at least some of their talent as alchemists

from their absent father. Their feelings of abandonment and resentment toward him make their effort to bring back their mother from the dead more understandable. But the boys pay a terrible price for violating the ban against restoring human life. When the spell fails, Al is reduced to a disembodied soul housed in a suit of armor; Ed loses his left leg, and sacrifices his right arm to save his brother's soul from annihilation. Together they roam a world that suggests late 19th century North America, seeking the Philosopher's Stone, which they believe can restore their bodies.

They pursue rumors of its existence, and Ed rejects a chance to make a Stone because it would require sacrificing human lives. But the external drama is overshadowed by the brothers' inner turmoil: Al starts to doubt he ever existed in human form; Ed fears Al hates him for initiating the experiment that destroyed his body. In a wrenching moment, Ed asks, "I wouldn't blame you if you did, Al, but I've got to know: Do you hate me for all that's happened?" Shocked, Al replies, "Brother, I could never hate you!" The strong performances by voice actors Aaron Dismuke (Al) and Vic Mignona (Ed) give the scene a power and an honesty absent from too many recent American animated films.

The one person the Elric brothers genuinely fear (and with good reason) is their old instructor, Izumi. Director Seiji Mizushima juxtaposes scenes of the brothers' current meeting with Izumi and flashbacks of their early training, suggesting the ongoing journey to their mastery of alchemy. Izumi's training methods are based on traditional Zen disciplines. Ed and Al must unravel the koan "All is One, One is All"; but in place of the slap Zen masters administer to shock a pupil and clear his mind, she beats the Elrics

cruelly—which American viewers may find needlessly sadistic.

Regardless of how Izumi treated them as boys, the Elrics have one more lesson to learn from her. Under her supervision, Ed re-



Kyo Kara Maoh!

members that when he attempted to bring back their mother, he stood before a gate that seemed to guard the road to all knowledge. (The designers modeled the portal on Rodin's grand and daunting *maquettes* for *The Gates of Hell*.) Izumi explains that when they attempted to re-create human life and approached that gate, the Elrics did more than violate the laws of alchemy: they disturbed the order of the universe more deeply than they could imagine.

Fullmetal Alchemist isn't all *Sturm und Drang*. The filmmakers balance the serious moments with slapstick comedy, including scenes of Ed going ballistic whenever someone notices how short he is. But the dramatic sequences and the powerful bond the brothers share pack an emotional punch that may leave American animators and audiences asking, "Why can't we make something like that?" ■

Fullmetal Alchemist, Vol. 6—
Captured Souls

Fullmetal Alchemist, Vol. 7—
Reunion on Yock Island (2000)

Fullmetal Alchemist, Vol. 8—
The Altar of Stone

[FUNimation: \$29.98 each]

Kyo Kara Maoh—God (?)

Save Our King! Vol. 1-6

[Geneon: \$24.98 each]



Fullmetal Alchemist

Rising Stars Class of 2006

As the toon world continues to expand to new platforms and dimensions, our job of narrowing a handful of creative individuals to profile in this annual feature gets harder and harder. As in previous years, the group selected for this article have high-profile projects in the pipeline that will put them in the spotlight later this year and in '07. Far from being overnight sensations, many of these talented people have been working in the toon trenches for many years, honing their craft and polishing their pitches. We wish we could dedicate a complete issue to all the rising stars. For now, we are happy to tell you the stories of how these dynamic visionaries made their dreams come true.

Jack Thomas, exec producer and Heather Martinez, animation director
Disney Channel's *The Replacements*

Heather Martinez and Jack Thomas first became pals working together on Nickelodeon's *Fairly OddParents* (Thomas was a writer and Martinez was a storyboard artist.). Martinez later joined the *My Life As a Teenage Robot* crew, but she and Thomas continued to plug away in the same building.

Then in late 2004, Thomas asked Martinez to be the director on a new Disney Channel show he was exec producing and writing called *The Replacements*. Created and written by children's author/illustrator Don Santat, the upcoming series centers on an off-the-wall spy parents. "The first thing I said was, 'No!' and walked away," recalls Martinez, who had been exhausted after a heavy load of freelance work. However, Thomas was eventually able to persuade his friend to come on board as a director for the first time in her career.

A lawyer-turned-stand-up comic-turned-cartoon-buff, Thomas has worked on everything from movie intros for American Movie Classics to jokes for the Fox NFL pre-game show to screenplays. However, it was a chat with *Fairly OddParents* story editor and comic Steve Marmel at the Improv Comedy Club that jump-started his toon writing



career.

Martinez, on the other hand, knew she wanted to work in animation since she was a little girl. After completing animation programs at Orange County High School and Cal State Fullerton, she landed a P.A. internship on *Angry Beavers* at Nickelodeon in 1999 and got her big break scoring a spot on the *SpongeBob SquarePants* team. "They were looking for a clean-

up artist/story person," she explains. "I dropped off my portfolio and Derek Drymon, the show's creative director, noticed that in addition to some character clean-up I had done, I had listed some awards that I had gotten for some student films." Drymon asked to see her reel and the rest was history.

So how did Thomas get her to enlist for directing duties on *The Replacements*? "It was such a cute idea, but I was still worried that I wouldn't get any sleep with this new project," she says. "Jack kindly reassured me that directing was not nearly as work-intensive as storyboarding...So I said, 'Ooooh! Yes!' and haven't slept since that day."

—Sarah Gurman

Sandra Equihua and Jorge Gutierrez Creators, Nickelodeon's series *El Tigre*

Almost 16 years ago, when Sandra Equihua and Jorge Gutierrez were high school students in Tijuana, Mexico, they knew that they shared a passion for animation. What they couldn't foresee was that they were going to end up partners in life and creative work in Los Angeles.

Set to debut on Nickelodeon in 2007, the husband-and-wife's brainchild is *El Tigre*, a clever show which centers on a teenager called Manny who is torn between becoming a superhero like his dad or a force of evil like his grandpa. (The tagline is good is good, but evil is more fun!)

Although they had to spend some years apart because Jorge was attending CalArts and Sandra was studying graphic arts in Mexico, they tied the knot when Jorge finished his thesis project. After they joined forces to work

on an Internet animated show called *El Macho* (Sandra specialized in Flash animation), they realized that in addition to their romantic partnership, they could also have a career together.

"Our ultimate goal was to make our own show," says Jorge. "We worked on Warner Bros.' *!Mucha Lucha!* and met a lot of development execs and cut our teeth in the animation industry together."

After a few false starts, *El Tigre* was greenlit at Nick. As Sandra sees it, "The show's design has been slowly evolving, but it's incredibly inspired by Mexican folk art—there's bullfighting, Day of the Dead, everything that we both love about Mexico and remember fondly from our childhood." Viewers may also see shades of classic spaghetti westerns and Mexican telenovelas in the toon.

And how does it feel to see their ideas come to animated life? "It's hard to describe, but we feel like it's Christmas every day," replies Jorge. "We have to keep pinching ourselves because the thing that we'd dreamt about for such a long time is really happening."

And wannabe animators would be wise to listen to Sandra's advice. "Don't be afraid to speak up, stay true to your vision and contact your heroes through the Internet. That's how we made a lot of our contacts." Jorge adds, "It may sound like a cliché, but don't try to second-guess the studios: Make something from your heart."

—Ramin Zahed



Adam Pava and Tim McKeon Creators, Cartoon Network's *Re-Animated*

Although they're self-described comedy nerds and got their first breaks in the business as interns on sitcoms such as *Friends*, *Malcolm in the Middle* and *The Drew Carey Show*, it's the animation field that has given Adam Pava and Tim McKeon their warmest welcome. The two met as grad students at USC's screenwriting program. After a variety of writing gigs, they found themselves writing for Cartoon Network's hit shows *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* and *The Life & Times of Juniper Lee*.

Then came the meeting with then Cartoon Network development exec Sam Register. "We were done with our pitches, and he said, 'Well, if you have any other ideas let us know!,'" recalls Pava. "It was our last pitch, and it had to do with a kid called Jimmy who has an accident at an amusement park and gets an emergency brain transplant ... Jimmy ends up with the frozen brain of a famous cartoonist, which lets him see cartoons wherever he goes! Sam liked the idea and told us to go home and write a treatment for the show that same night."

Titled *Re-Animated*, the project is Cartoon Network's first foray in the live-action sitcom format. "The animated part of the show (which is done in Flash by Renegade Animation) allows us to pay homage to all the classic cartoons. Jimmy can see all these wonderful iconic characters...that could have been around for 75 years," notes McKeon. "It's great to have this show on Cartoon Network because we try to reflect our love for the great characters in cartoon history. And our designer Shannon Tindle [*Foster's Home*], created all these characters which could very well have been popular through various decades."

Both Pava and McKeon praise one of the smoothest live-action/animation hybrids of all time, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* "I must



have been 11 when it came out and thought it was the best thing in the world," says McKeon. "When we started working on our show, we went back and watched it again, and it was amazing to see how well it holds up after two decades. It's really the pinnacle of the genre."

And the secret behind the success of the Pava/McKeon team? "Well, our cubicles were right next to each other," shares Pava. "It's a lot easier to do the work when there's two of you! Our partnership is bred out of laziness and our knack for splitting a paycheck!"

—Ramin Zahed

Dave Funston Animator, Zoic Studios

The line between visual effects and animation is blurring by the second. But ask Zoic Studios' Dave Funston to describe his craft, and he has an instant answer: "I definitely consider myself an animator," says Funston, 25. "Through animation, I create visual effects."

Working on fx-heavy TV shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Smallville*, as well as on commercials, Funston has earned a reputation as a skilled generalist who can handle any kind of animation task.

Growing up in Rock Hill, S.C., Funston loved to watch shows about moviemaking. "I remember watching *The Making of The Abyss*, and they showed the cool water monster thing," he says. That led Funston to a high school elective that introduced him to Photoshop and computer graphics. Instantly taking to the technology, Funston went on to attend Florida's Full Sail school. Upon graduation, Funston headed for Los Angeles and almost immediately met a Full Sail alumnus who gave him a tracking job on *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. Funston then landed at 525 Studios, where he worked on the first season of *Smallville* and began to expand his repertoire to shading and lighting.

The TV schedule was rigorous and taught Funston a lot about being efficient: "We worked six months on *Jay and Silent Bob* just tracking lightsabers. Now it was, 'You need to track this whole scene and do all these skeleton shots in four days,'" he says.

When 525 folded, Funston went to Radium and continued to work on *Smallville* while also picking up effects work on *Buffy* and *Angel*. "Those shows call for all kinds of little effects from particle effects to digital animation," he says. Soon after, Funston joined Zoic, which was formed by former Radium folks and has of late been working mostly on commercials. He says he's especially happy with a just-finished all-CG spot for Lexus in which the camera flies through the company's new hybrid, showing how the technology works.

"We met the creative director, and he told us the story they wanted to tell and I sat down and said, 'This would be cool' and worked out a storyboard," he says. "It turned out pretty nice, very much like I wanted it to and they loved it. They wanted almost no changes on it, which rarely happens." Funston says he wants to continue to develop the skills that have brought him this far and is always looking for ways to be both efficient and creative. He adds, "I want to do work that evokes an emotional response from people."

—Thomas J. McLean



Scott Bateman Animator, www.batemania.com

Ever have someone tell you that the end of one regular gig can lead to the start of better things? No finer example of this universal law can be found than one-time syndicated political cartoonist Scott Bateman who decided to dive into the exciting world of web-based Flash animation after Kings Feature Syndicate dropped him from its payroll. He decided to create an animated short every day and put the shorts on his site (www.Batemania.com/bateman365) last August. So far, he's managed to deliver a nice collection based on real-life audio clips, one minute at a time.

"I just love hearing people tell stories," says the 42-year-old Portland, Oregon, native who moved to New York City with his wife last year to explore new opportunities. "I'm used to working with a daily deadline."

Bateman, who has fond memories of watching *Schoolhouse Rock* and *Hong Kong Phooey* as a kid, says he was drawing on walls at an early age. After getting his degree in psychology from the University of Puget Sound, he found himself taking animation classes, and with the easy availability of affordable software, decided to try his hand on Flash-based projects. "After a while, creating animation for corporate types was a bit of a drag," he explains. "That's when I decided to do animation that was fun for me."

So now that he's only got a couple of months to go, has he learned any valuable lessons from his year of daily tooning? "Well, some days are easier than others!" he laughs. "Sometimes you have a lot of ideas and everything moves quickly ... and, then there are days when it's really difficult to get going. But I love doing it. The shorts let me play *Mystery Science Theater* with people's stories: I can add visual commentaries to the story and be a smart-ass each and every day."

—Ramin Zahed



Stefan Nadelman Animator, Curious Pictures

Stefan Nadelman's decision to switch careers from graphic design to animation was, in retrospect, a no-brainer.

"Animation was a lot more rewarding and sexy than web banners," says the 33-year-old Brooklyn-based animator. That decision led to the creation of award-winning shorts such as *Latin Alive* and *Terminal Bar*, as well as a successful career creating commercials and promotions. A fan from his childhood of *Mad Magazine*, the Sunday funnies and toons such as *G.I. Joe*, *He-Man* and *Tom & Jerry*, he worked as a graphic designer after graduating from Iowa State University in 1994, and then learned to use Flash to work for web clients.

RESFEST, the traveling film and multimedia festival, was what inspired Nadelman to make his first animated short. He explains, "It was a good goal because I knew I could do it and submit it to RESFEST." That film, *Latin Alive*, made the Best of RESFEST 2001 DVD. His second film, 2003's *Terminal Bar*, won RESFEST's Audience Choice Award and was accepted at Sundance, where it won the jury prize for short film.

At the event, Nadelman's short caught the attention of VH1 producer Matt Hanna, who offered him graphic jobs for shows such as *Fabulous Life* and *Ego Trip's Race-O-Rama*. HBO also hired him to create promos for *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet*

Under, while at the same time, he continued to work on his own shorts, including *One Step Ahead*, which was commissioned by Nike. After a RESFEST showcase event, he decided to hang his hat with Richard Winkler and his New York studio Curious Pictures.

The animator, who works from his home in Brooklyn on his G5 using After Effects, Photoshop and Illustrator, is currently working on a commercial for the Scion XA and a short film for the 10th anniversary of RESFEST, called *Food Fight*. "It's about war, WWII to present day, using food from the representative countries," he says. "It's basically food fighting each other."

Nadelman says the idea of working on a feature-length project is tempting, but he feels like he's not ready for it yet. "Shorts are perfect for me for now," he says. "What I need to say can be accomplished in short form."

—Thomas J. McLean



Glen McIntosh Animation Director, *Eragon*

In the past ten years, Glen McIntosh has worked as a character animator and lead animator on an astounding list of animated and vfx-laden projects, including *Anastasia*, *Star Wars: Episode I, II and III*, *Jurassic Park III*, *Deep Blue Sea*, *Hulk* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. So why is he one of our "rising stars"? That's because McIntosh is leading the animation team at ILM to create over 320 shots for one of the most-anticipated fantasies of the holiday season, *Eragon*. Based on the best-selling book by young author Christopher Paolini, the movie features Saphira, a beautiful CG-animated dragon. "She is a majestic and elegant creature of fantasy, but we had to create anchor points in real animals like lions, dogs and eagles," says the Calgary-born artist, whose roots go back to hand-drawn animation.

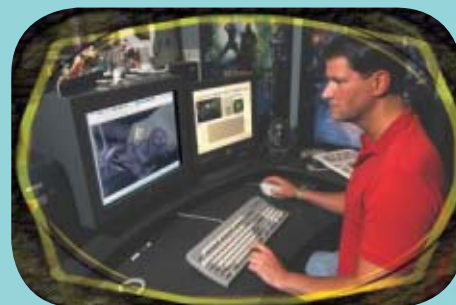
McIntosh studied the essentials of film theory at the University of Calgary, but it was through summer programs at Sheridan College where he fine-tuned his love for animation. After successful stints as an animator at Don Bluth's Studio in Ireland and Phoenix, he switched gears from 2D to CG animation at ILM, where he got the chance to work with some of his heroes, including George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Ang Lee.

"I knew that *Eragon* was a great fit because I love animating dragons, dinosaurs, aliens and creatures," says McIntosh. "We're creating a character that's unique and never been done before. We learn from each project and take inspiration from all the benchmark CG-animated characters of recent years—Yoda, Gollum, King Kong and Aslan in *Narnia*."

Although his CG skills played a big role in furthering his career, McIntosh also stresses the importance of animation fundamentals. "You don't just want to be trained on computers because drawing and study of film teaches you aesthetics and composition, and figure drawing helps you visualize character poses."

Besides spending "half his salary" on his prized *Lord of the Rings* Sideshow Collectibles, McIntosh says he takes great pleasure in seeing the accomplishments of his fellow vfx artists all over the world. "The work that we're going to see on the Davy Jones character [in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*] this summer, for example, is quite inspiring in detail, complexity and realism. With each film, the level of quality keeps going up exponentially, and we all seem to be learning from each other."

— Ramin Zahed



Jennifer Shiman Creator, *The 30-Second Bunnies Theatre*

Brokeback Mountain, *Jaws* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* may all be classics, but if you haven't seen Jennifer Shiman's hilarious 30-second Flash-animated bunny versions, you're really missing out. In 2004, Shiman kicked off the careers of her thespian cotton-tails with a 30-second bunny re-enactment of *The Exorcist* which quickly developed a loyal web following. Shortly thereafter, the Starz Entertainment Group commissioned *Freddy vs. Jason*, *Scream* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* bunny bits for its Hare-Raising Halloween Marathon. Shiman's animated parodies were wildly popular with viewers and since then Starz has continued to commission more rabbit re-enactments (*Caddy Shack* is up next).

A life-long toon fan, Shiman grew up reading *Peanuts* and *Family Circus* collections and tuning in on Saturday morning TV shows. Not surprisingly, *Bugs Bunny and Friends* was her favorite. In college she focused on business and media studies, but she also took art classes. "My love for animation jumped to a whole new level when I went to my first *Spike & Mike* Festival in college and watched short films by Bill Plympton and Nick Park," she recalls. Shiman also spent a number of years working as a freelance production

assistant at Chicago's Calabash Animation.

In 1998 she animated her first short, discovered Flash and struck out on her own, starting Angry Alien Productions. "I began working with Flash as a cost-effective way to produce additional animated projects on my own," she notes, "as well as a means to earn income via electronic production and design."

Looks like Flash has treated Shiman and her bunnies well over the years: In addition to success on the web and the Starz' networks, her camera-savvy critters have earned honors at the Fantasia Film Festival and Ottawa International Animation Festival and even made appearances on *Good Morning America*! Shiman has also moved successfully into the licensing realm, offering bunny emblazoned mugs, t-shirts, baby bibs and even underwear to help offset web host and bandwidth costs. If you haven't met her cartoon creations, head to www.angryalien.com and check out the recently posted *Reservoir Dogs* re-enactment (Don't worry, there's a bleeped version available!). We're patiently awaiting the arrival of the bunnies' *El True Hollywood Story*.

— Sarah Gurman



Edmund McMillen Creator of *Gish*

Winning the Seamus McNally Grand Prize at the 2005 Independent Games Festival (IGF) was a life-changing event for Edmund McMillen, creator of the popular Flash-based game, *Gish*. In addition to proposing to his girlfriend on stage during his acceptance speech, Edmund felt as if he scored a win for the little guys since his team had previously been shut out by larger teams with bigger budgets. Shortly after the win, though, Chronic Logic LLC disbanded, and rights disputes led to the loss of mainstream publishing deals for *Gish*, which retains its underground charm.

"When I started making Flash games online, there really wasn't any respect from the game development community at all," McMillen recalls. "Flash was considered a joke to many professional programmers and designers and really wasn't looked at as marketable, mostly because everyone seemed to be giving it away for free. Since then, a lot has changed. There are console games being made in Flash and a lot of animators are using Flash for sprite animation."

At a time when a lot of the innovation in gaming seems to be coming from the indies, artists like



McMillen are moving from the fringe of the industry to the cutting edge. "I can't help but feel like we did something right with *Gish*, and maybe changed what the mainstream saw as successful," he remarks. "Personally, I think it will be the independent game development communities that will change the way we play games in the future; that is if we all don't sell out."

Gish co-creator and designer Alex Austin recently founded Cryptic Sea and is working with McMillen on two new games—a *Gish* "spiritual successor" titled *The Book of Knots* and a yet untitled physics-based puzzle game that casts the player as a crazed gold miner and features a lot of *Ren and Stimpy*-inspired animation. McMillen is also completing a side project he's been working on for four years. *The Badlands* is based on all the games he created with Caulder Bradford under Diverge Creations. He hopes to have it ready for next year's IGF. For more information, see www.crypticsea.com and www.coldstoragedesigns.com.

—Ryan Ball

Greg Collinson Creator, Nelvana's *Di-Gata Defenders*

Like most animators, Nelvana's Greg Collinson has a backstock of ideas that may never see the light of day. Unlike most toon professionals, the designer's ideas so impressed the Toronto-based animation studio that they turned it into a full-fledged series, the boys' actioner *Di-Gata Defenders*.

"Creatively, it doesn't get any better than this because I feel I'm involved all the way from conception to completion," says Collinson.

Collinson's always had a taste for immersive boys' action stories. As a kid in Hamilton, Ontario, he read *X-Men* comics and watched anime shows such as

Robotech, *Force Five* and *G-Force*. Today, he still plays video games and is a self-described nut for the tabletop war game *Warhammer*.

When Collinson went to Sheridan College after a year of fine arts education, he chose the illustration program because he thought the



animation work "looked silly." But after taking a closer look, he changed his mind. "There was a lot of focus on story and character," he says. "That's ultimately what drew me towards animation."

Wanting to stay in Canada, Collinson landed a job with Nelvana and started out as a prop designer and clean-up artist on *Flying Rhino Junior High*, moving up location design and concept work on shows such as *Rescue Heroes*, *Maggie and the Ferocious Beast*, *Braceface* and *Jacob Two-Two*.

It was during one of the company's "pitch your ideas" events that Collinson came up with *Di-Gata*, a quest-like story about youngsters who must protect the world from the Megaliths imprisoned in four magic stones. Working with writer Ken Cuperus, Collinson's duties include working with the directors, developing stories and working on storyboards. The show is set to debut in the fall on Canada's Teletoon channel.

Di-Gata reflects the 33-year-old animator's affection for the complex, immersive stories he has always admired. "The most interesting story you can tell with a science fiction or fantasy story is the human stories, the personal stories that are told against the backdrop," he says.

That makes TV animation the perfect medium for Collinson, "TV has a certain leg up on features. We have 26 episodes of *Di-Gata*. That gives you a lot of time to tell stories," he says.

—Thomas J. McLean

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SPECIAL REPORT



John Knoll | BA University of Southern California | Visual Effects Supervisor, Industrial Light & Magic, San Francisco, California | Co-creator Photoshop | 20-year SIGGRAPH attendee

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Head in the Clouds

The latest project of Canada's g Story Entertainment, *Skyland*, is about to make the world's imagination soar.

by Jake Friedman

Small studios come and go, as we're all well aware. However, one recent success story of the industry is g Story Entertainment. Founded four years ago by Vince Commisso and Steven Jarosz, g Story may be Canada's fastest-growing hub of new animation, with a roster meriting a raise of the eyebrow. Its Emmy-award winning *Peep and the Big Wide World*, produced with WGBH Boston, has gained international recognition and critical acclaim in children's television, and its various nominations and accolades are on the rise with programs and specials like *Best Eci* and *If the World Were a Village*. The latter, a short piece emphasizing international empathy in a global community, is one of the most inspiring and mobilizing children's pieces that has come along in quite a while.

"Our focus is on producing good programming, with well-written stories and characters young audiences will invest in," says Commisso, between phone calls from his home base in Toronto. Commisso, producer of the projects that come out of g Story Entertainment, is constantly in communication with producers and distributors all over the world. France and Canada's good international relations, for instance, have resulted in a treaty co-production between g Story in Toronto and Method Films in Paris. And with international distributors, Commisso has been able to put out various projects across Europe, Latin America, Australia and Asia.

In fact, it was with the help of India's animation house DQ Entertainment Limited that g Story's latest creative venture, *Skyland*, was able to take off. Co-produced by g Story and Method, *Skyland* is bound to impress its audience with its film-quality production standards. Using the combination of enchanting dreamscape backgrounds painted by director/

show creator Emmanuel Gorinstein and CG motion capture over special sci-fi effects, *Skyland* appears less like a regular television show and more like something that should be on the big screen. "Emmanuel created these amazing landscapes over at Method Films. When I saw these images, I knew I wanted to be part of the project."

The project itself is the epic science-fiction story that follows the adventures of two renegade children gifted with special powers. Based two hundred years in the future, the earth is broken up into millions of floating islands reminiscent of Gulliver's island of Laputa as described by Jonathan Swift. A tyrannical empire known as The Sphere oppresses the population for the sake of their most valuable commodity: water. When The Sphere discovers that teenager Mahad's little sister Lena possess incredible energy-harnessing superpowers, the kids flee their home and are forced to join a troupe of rebels bent on bringing down the rule of oppression.

"The personalities of the characters are really what drive the story," says Commisso. "For instance, the main male character, the 16-year-old, has to grow up from being a boy and has to learn how to become a hero, all in the course of the story. Above all else, we want the audience to believe in the characters, and we try to make that happen by treating them with integrity."

Commisso estimates that across India, France and Canada, *Skyland* has been employing between 500 and 600 people since the start of production. "The idea was pitched in 2002. We reached a point where we had the means to use motion



capture. If someone pitched the idea of mo-cap like this in 1998, it would have been an impossibility." *Skyland* utilizes several types of high-end software, like Photoshop, Maya, RenderMan, MotionBuilder and Shake for compositing. While g Story is well-versed in the merits of 2D animation for its other projects, Commisso stands behind the creative choice of implementing CG. "Many studios out there might use CG because it's flashy or because it might be the hot thing right now. We chose to use it because it was the best tool to tell the story we wanted to tell. There really is no better way to get this idea across." That idea has captured the interest of more than a half-dozen broadcasters around the world. What did Commisso have to say about the next big thing for g Story Entertainment and *Skyland*? "We're premiering all across the world, from Israel to Norway. We're reaching to broadcasters in Europe and the Americas. For a brand new show, it's exciting to see it reach such a wide audience." ■

Jake Friedman in a New York-based journalist and animator. Visit his website at www.jakefriednman.net.

***Skyland* airs Saturdays and Sundays on Teletoon at 7:30 p.m.**

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He's Still Mickey from the Disney Block

The mouse has gone CG and interactive, but the creators of Disney Channel's *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* say they've stayed true to the spirit of the beloved character.

by Sarah Gurman

When Ub Iwerks and Walt crafted Mickey Mouse in 1928, they could hardly have predicted the timeless impact of their creation. Not only have the black ears and white gloves gained worldwide notoriety as a symbol of good will and the spirit of the Walt Disney Company, Mickey has even been given his own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and immortalized by Andy Warhol.

Still, when the team behind the new Playhouse Disney series *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* began doing research for this new incarnation of Mickey, they were surprised to find that the tiniest of tots were quite familiar with the charming mouse. "It's amazing, we were actually surprised that there's a huge awareness of Mickey at a really early age even though he hasn't been really exposed on television or videos that much to that age group," notes *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* exec producer Bobs Gannaway (Disney's *Mickey MouseWorks*, *House of Mouse*, *The Emperor's New School*).

The idea of bringing Mickey Mouse to preschoolers first bubbled up while the Playhouse Disney producers were look-

ing for a host for a new two- to five-year-old targeted learning series. "We knew that the shows that have worked best with young kids are interactive ones, where the audience feels like they're playing along as opposed to just sitting back and watching," explains Disney Channel SVP of original programming Nancy Kanter. "It's always been Mickey's way to connect one-on-one with kids, whether it's at the Disney theme parks or on video, so he is the perfect character to further develop a close relationship with kids in a preschool learning environment."

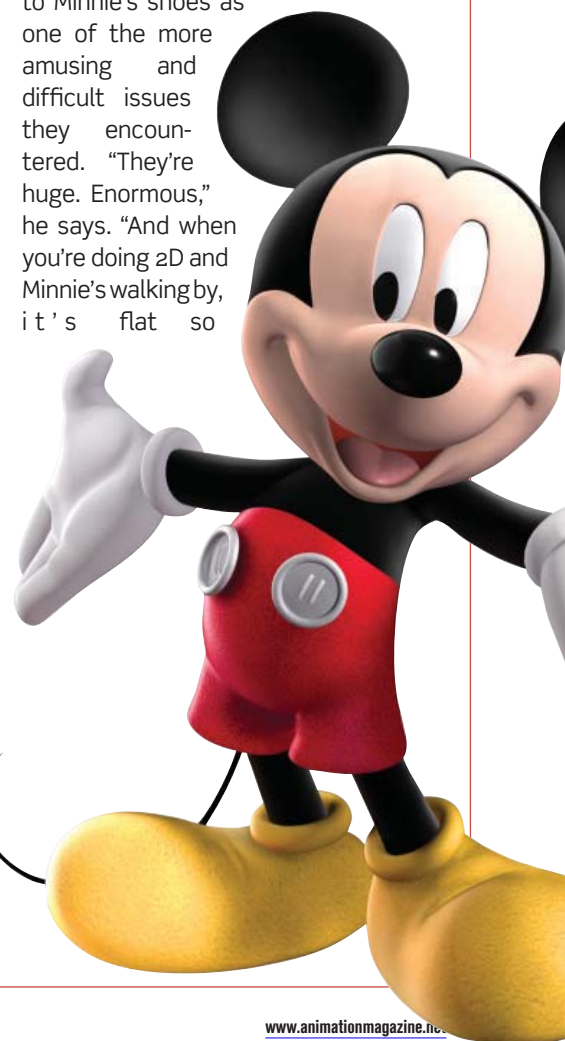
Of course, Mickey's character had to evolve to work with the property's interactive format and modern preschool audience. Whenever an evergreen character like Mickey gets a new facelift, fans can only hold their breath and hope that the latest version will be faithful to the spirit of the original character. Luckily, mouseketeers could rest a little easier knowing that Gannaway, a Mickey maestro with a glowing track record, was helping the project.

Mickey's new look in *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* will probably be the first thing

noticed by older fans. Though Disney has done the mouse in 3D before (The traditionally 2D character took on the new medium in the popular direct-to-DVD release *Mickey's Twice Upon a Christmas*), this is Mickey's first regular CG series. "It was there from the beginning to do Mickey as a computer-animated character," Gannaway notes. "I think a lot of it has to do with what the audience is seeing now. They've seen a lot of computer animation from all different videos, and it seemed only a natural evolution to bring Mickey into that genre."

Gannaway and his creative team took special care to make Mickey and co. (That's right, Minnie, Daisy, Donald, Goofy and Pluto are back for some clubhouse action!) make the 3D transition smoothly, referring to 1940s drawings during production in an effort to preserve the vision of the characters' creators. Of course, the Disney team ran into some obstacles building the clubhouse crew as 3D rigs. Gannaway points to Minnie's shoes as

one of the more amusing and difficult issues they encountered. "They're huge. Enormous," he says. "And when you're doing 2D and Minnie's walking by, it's flat so





Nancy Kanter



Bobs Gannaway

you can cheat...[But] when we were working on her walk cycle, she had to really fling her legs out in sort of a very artificial, disturbing way in order to clear her shoes."

Mickey's ears also proved a formidable 3D task because traditionally they are perfectly round no matter which way he turns his head, and the team wanted to respect that flat design in CG. "What we did to stay true to Mickey's profile was build a rig that would allow the ears to roll around like two balls," Gannaway explains, "This way, as Mickey's speaking to you, looking directly at the camera or then turning to Goofy or turning the other way to Minnie, as he turns his head, his ears actually roll around so that his profile's always accurate." In addition to preserving Mickey's 2D profile, Gannaway decided to light the show brightly (though he didn't go so far as to toon shade) to help maintain a certain flat element and keep the characters looking familiar.

Beyond the striking visuals, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* brings a new dimension to the relationship between the viewers and these on-screen characters with Mickey and the Sensational Six directly addressing their preschool audience during the show. As producer/story editor Leslie Valdez (*Dora the Explorer*, *The Backyardigans*) notes, "Mickey and those characters have never been in an interactive show so that was a challenge in and of itself, trying to figure out how to mold Mickey's vernacular into an interactive give and take with the audience."

Valdez and the rest of the creative team managed to adapt Mickey to the format so he would address the preschoolers as friends, never talking down to them. Each episode of *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* begins as

the mouse host extraordinaire invites his friends to join him in calling out the magic phrase "Meeska, Mooska, Mickey Mouse," which triggers the appearance of the tricked out Mickey-inspired clubhouse. Then some sort of problem or challenge arises for the Disney crew to resolve with the help of viewers, who are expected to pick up math skills along the way.

And of course in these device-driven times we're living in, even preschoolers are technologically saavy so in addition to the shape-shifting clubhouse, *The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* team has the retro-futuristic Mousekedoer computer, an array of Mouseketools and the portable Toodles device at its disposal to help get organized and prepared to tackle the daily task.

Along with Gannaway and Valdez, award-winning directors Robert LaDuca (*Lilo & Stitch: The Series*, *Jimmy Neutron*, *Boy Genius*) and Sherie E. Pollack (*Dora the Explorer*, *The Simpsons*) also bring their talents to the show. Among the Disney vets on board for vocal duties are Wayne Allwine as Mickey, Russi Taylor as Minnie, Tony Anselmo as Donald (He mastered the voice with the help of the original, Clarence "Ducky" Nash, and has been Disney's resident

Donald since 1987.), Bill Farmer as Goofy and Pluto and Tress MacNeille as Daisy and Chip & Dale. (Yes, even the Rescue Rangers make some fun appearances.) Look for cameos from other Disney animated bigwigs like Professor Von Drake, Clarabelle Cow, Pete the Cat, Willie the Giant and Figaro. Also, keep your ears peeled for the catchy theme song and the show-closing "Hot Dog!" ditty courtesy of the band, They Might Be Giants.

Interestingly, in the midst of the music and classic characters, for Gannaway, it's the clubhouse that holds the appeal. "I'm really excited about the show because I really feel like it's got a lot of my own personality in it, in addition to staying true to all of the characters," he notes. "The environment itself, the place the show takes place in, Mickey Mouse' clubhouse is something that I feel really close to because I just really wanted to make sure that this was a magic, fun, cool place that you want to go spend time in." See you there! ■

***Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* premieres Friday, May 5 at 7 p.m., and will air regularly Saturdays at 9 a.m. starting May 6 on the Disney Channel during the learning-focused Playhouse Disney programming block for preschoolers.**



Objects of Our Affection

Hot for Hanna-Barbera and Homer



Christmas is almost seven months away, but many of us toonheads already know what we want Santa to bring us. Yes, we're all drooling over the new line of McFarlane Toys' Hanna-Barbera figures which will officially hit the market in July. The first wave of the replicas feature two Fred Flintstone items (riding a chopper and a cruiser deluxe boxed set), Hong Kong Phooey in his trademark attack pose, Quick Draw McGraw as alter ego El Kabong, and two sets of the Tom & Jerry cat-and-mouse team in a rock and roll pose, and in a classic "No Trespassing" scene. Each collectible costs about \$27.99, but if you're under their spell, you can pick up all six for \$149.

Simpsons fans can pick up the brilliant "Ironical Punishment" boxed set, which has the devil force-feeding Homer donuts in hell (priced at \$25.99). Based on the *Treehouse of Horror IV* segment called "The Devil and Homer Simpson," this one measures 7"x 6"x 9" and has a moving crank that feeds the sugary treats straight into Homer's mouth. What a glorious, twisted way to celebrate the partnership between Matt Groening and Todd McFarlane. (Both collectible series are available at www.entertainmentearth.com.)

Mutant Madness

We hear that many X-Men purists are having major qualms about director Brett Ratner's summer pic about the durable Marvel team of misfits. Many are wishing that Bryan Singer was back behind the cameras for the third outing. No matter how everyone feels about *X-Men: The Last Stand*, we're happy that Toy Biz is releasing a new set of action figures based on our favorite heroes.



You should be able to get your hands on the Series One line (including Stealth Wolverine, Ninja Strike Wolverine, Ruby Quartz Armor Cyclops, Stealth Beast, Magneto, Gambit, Archangel and Storm) in May. Why risk the vagaries of the film industry when you can shoot your own stop-motion adventure with these ultra-cool action figures? And if you really want to plunge into the superhero world, pick up Playmates Toys' Marvel Heroes Battle Dice Game, featuring collectible mini-figures for the X-Men as well as Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four and other power-wielding heroes and villains. Rule the universe Marvel style with a roll of the dice!

Licking the Mouse



The U.S. Postal Service and the Mouse House are continuing their love affair this month by unveiling a new collection of stamp panes honoring classic Disney characters for the third year in a row. The four new 39-cent stamps feature romantic partners Cinderella and Prince Charming, Cinderella and Prince Charming; Beauty and the Beast; Lady and Tramp; and, of course, Mickey and Minnie Mouse. They're a couple of months too late for Valentine's Day cards, but these babies would look really good on Mother's Day missives. To order, visit www.usps.com.

Put SpongeBob on the Phone!



Now that Nick Mobile Online is available on Sprint multimedia phones, many of the cabler's cool toons are ready for their mini-screen debut. That means we're soon going to see toddlers blissing out on *Dora the Explorer* and *Wonder Pets* on mommy's cell phones. Parents can get some peace in the car as older kids watch *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Avatar* and *Catscratch*. We don't even want to know what happens when you get your phone bill at the end of the month!

Floating Friends

We love all the fun tie-in toys Wild Planet has lined up for DreamWorks' *Over the Hedge* this month, but besides the fun talking plush dolls and figure packs, we were mightily impressed with their Aquapets. The attention-grabbing playthings feature the pic's three top critters—Verne, R.J. and Hammy—floating in water and allow you to interact with the buoyant wonders. When was the last time \$12.95 bought you so much fun? You can visit www.wildplanet.com to get your hands on the new toys. ■



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Making Magnificent Waves

How Boyd Shermis and his vfx team created a CG tempest in a teapot for Wolfgang Petersen's new take on *The Poseidon Adventure*. by Ron Magid

Midnight, New Year's Eve: A massive tidal wave smashes into a luxury liner, upending it. A small group of survivors desperately seek a way out through the topsy-turvy bowels of the ship.

Beyond that fundamental plotline, Wolfgang Petersen's remake of Irwin Allen's uber-disaster flick, *The Poseidon Adventure* (circa 1972) follows some unique currents of its own—not to mention the absence of the late, great Shelley Winters. "It takes on a modern twist, modern sensibilities and certainly a modern technology, in terms of both the ship and the visual effects," promises *Poseidon*'s overall visual effects supervisor, Boyd Shermis, whose amazing list of credits includes *Speed*, *Batman Forever*, *Face/Off* and next month's *Superman Returns*.

Indeed, the original used the venerable Queen Mary; the remake takes its design inspiration from the modern superliner, the Queen Mary II. The original relied on a miniature ship and scaled water; the remake's visuals are almost entirely digital, which demanded an effects tsunami in the approach to oceanic phenomena.

Shermis went to ILM, but even the stellar track record of the vfx house with state-of-the-art waters in *Pearl Harbor* and Petersen's own *The Perfect Storm* was no match for the director's latest vision. "Wolfgang gave me three directives," Shermis recalls. "It had to 'outstorm' *The Perfect Storm*, it had to out-Titanic *Titanic*, and, thirdly, it had to be photo-f***ing-real. It's obviously quite a tall order. Both of those prior films set certain standards, which today might not look so terribly difficult, but water is still one of the hardest things to make look right and to get to do what you want it to do."

Unlike *Titanic*, which was accomplished with miniatures and digital water,

Poseidon's fx were always going to be CG. "With all due respect, I wasn't a big fan of *Titanic*'s miniature work, and I didn't want *Poseidon* to suffer the same scaling water problems," Shermis says. "You can cheat miniature water as far as one-fifth scale and make it work, but when you consider that our ship is nearly 1,200 feet long, one-fifth scale is still a couple-hundred-



Courtesy: Warner Bros. Pictures

foot-long miniature—that's a huge boat! On top of that, it's got to be completely interactive with all this water, which just couldn't happen with a miniature."

Problems arose from the very first shot, a three-minute flyover around the *Poseidon* at sea. "It's one incredibly difficult, 4,390-frames-long shot," says ILM's visual effects supervisor, Kim Libreri (the *Matrix* trilogy). "Every single detail of this 1,200-foot ocean liner was completely computer generated, from deckchairs, to tables, to bars, to flags, to waiters, everything except the little greenscreen elements, plus a completely computer-generated ocean."

"It's definitely the most detailed model that ILM ever rendered," affirms associate visual effects supervisor Mohen Leo (*The Perfect Storm*'s vfx technical director). "There's over 6,500 individual set pieces on the ship and over 180,000 pieces of geometry that were rendered."

In fact, the *Poseidon* is one of the big-

gest computer graphics renderings of all time—out of necessity. "It had to interact in a fully three-dimensional fashion in the volume of water," Shermis explains. "Ours needed something a little more spectacular than *Titanic*, both from a dramatic and a raising-the-bar point of view. Theirs just broke up and sank; ours had to be hit by the wave, completely enveloped and turned over, and when it rolled back out of the ocean, water's got to come pouring off of it. So the team at ILM had to rewrite all of their water technology, which in *Perfect Storm* was fundamentally a 2D surface tension with some very slick texture mapping and particle work, and the boat just fundamentally sat on the surface or would sink below and come back up."

Rather than relying on that earlier fluid dynamics technology, *Poseidon* dove right into a huge R&D experiment in total immersive simulations thanks to an unholy alliance between ILM and Stanford University. "Professor Ron Fedkiw and a



team of students worked very closely with us for weeks on end, trying to break the barrier with dynamics," Libreri recalls. "There was a time just before Christmas where we were not getting the resolution we needed to tell our story of massive ocean waves hitting the liner, but Ron's team worked out a way."

Libreri is quick to point out that all

would still take a week to turn around a single simulation. We ended up doing parallel fluid simulation, which sounds geeky but just means that the problem could be spread across many computers. The pipeline is a story in itself—it was really on the edge of computer science. People are astounded by the visual resources of the show because we are trying to simu-

even from what we could do a year ago. We created breaking waves, which was the holy grail of fluid simulation."

Except a single simulation wouldn't get *Shermis*, Libreri and company all the way through a sequence as complex as the 30 shots needed for the killer wave to upend the *Poseidon*. Each of those cuts demanded its own simulation, which can take half a Gigabyte and need to go through many iterations before they're ready for their close-up. "It's about as predictable as a 100 million gallon dump tank," Libreri grins. "You wouldn't want to bet your money on exactly where it's going to go in the real world. One of our biggest issues is that it's a movie, so our wave is unfeasibly big and hangs around for a long time. Real water just wouldn't sustain itself like this does. It's meant to be 180-feet high, but in some shots we have to crank it up to 400-feet so it looks feasible on the screen. Keeping it up there so it doesn't just collapse on itself and become a rip curl is a physics-defying feat, and sometimes we switched the physics off or ran the simulation upside down to make it look cool on screen." ■

Warner Bros.' *Poseidon* opens on May 12 in theaters nationwide. For more info, visit www2.warnerbros.com/Poseidon.

"Every single detail of this 1,200-foot ocean liner was completely computer-generated—from deck chairs, to tables, to bars, to flags, to waiters, everything except the little greenscreen elements, plus a completely computer-generated ocean."

—Kim Libreri, ILM's vfx supervisor for *Poseidon*

the dedication and patience finally paid off. "The proper dynamics were computationally heavy, and it's a sequential providence, which meant we had to start with the first frame, solve that, then go to the second frame, solve that, etc." He adds, "So we'd start at the beginning and go to the end, and even though we have machines with eight or 16 GB of ram, it

late the biggest wave ever for any motion picture."

"This was really the first time we've been able to simulate a whole volume of water that can collide with an object, splash apart and move around the object in a complex manner with internal swirling," Leo adds. "It's a huge leap forward not just from *The Perfect Storm*, but

Tech Reviews

Autodesk's
MotionBuilder 7.5

Autodesk's new MotionBuilder 7.5 is the first software release since the company completed the acquisition of Alias last January. Not a general 3D program that handles modeling, dynamics, animation or texturing, this substantial program is for character animation—period.

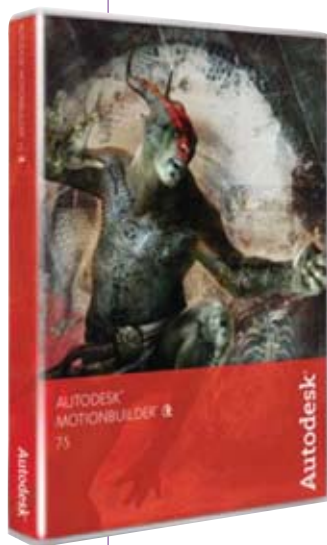
And because the product's objective is clear, there is focus on tools which address the specific problems encountered by character animators and riggers.

In general, the advanced toolset consists of rapid skeleton creation for bipeds and quadrupeds, support for inverted joints for characters like birds and dogs, as well as animation mapping skeletons brought in from 3D programs that support the FBX format. Wide motion-capture support is well integrated and substantial retargeting

between complex characters is made easier and more automatic.

The MotionBuilder solver is a hybrid Forward and Inverse Kinematic system, so you can animate in both modes at the same time. If you are animating the hand with IK, the rest of the arm follows and tries to resolve the position, extending the end effector beyond the reach of the character which causes the arm to straighten as it tries to reach the goal. If you pull the effector beyond the character's

reach with the body solver on, the entire biped skeleton will adjust the spine, hips and legs as well. This gives a lot of control for rapidly setting up performances because there is no need to manually adjust each body part.



by Todd
Sheridan
Perry



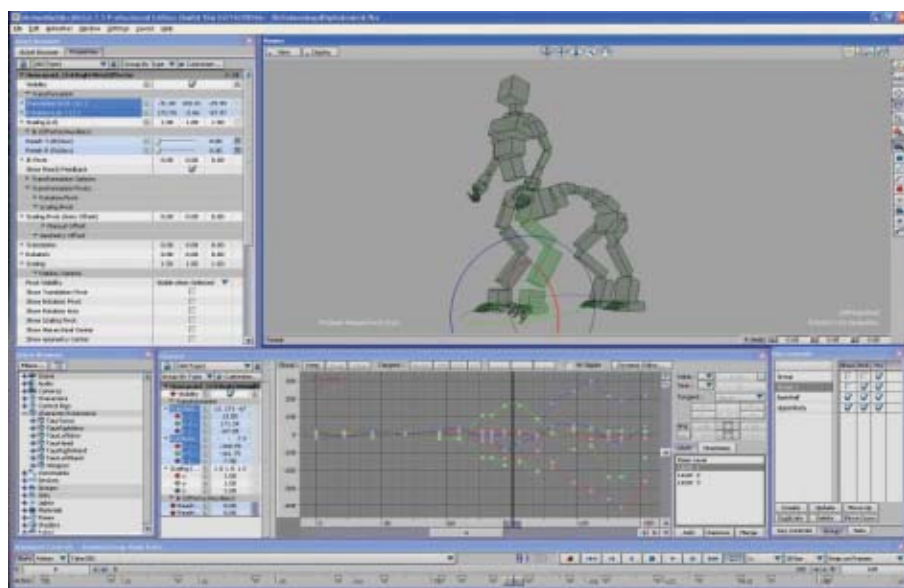
An advancement in 7.5 takes the functionality of the built in skeleton structure and propagates it to character extensions, which are items not naturally found on a human—wings, tails, antennae, guns, etc. In previous versions, extensions were not taken into consideration. Now, all the control and flexibility available to the root skeleton can be applied to the extensions, including saving out poses for easy retrieval of often used positions of both the full body and the individual body parts.

The most impressive addition, in my mind, is called Double Solving. The function is used when you have a situation where two characters are dependent on one other—fighting, dancing, shaking hands. The problem with this situation is that a dependency loop is created. One character is moving one way, pulling the other character, but the other character is being affected by the first—so where does the solver begin? Without getting too far into it, MotionBuilder uses this Double Solving to place a buffer between the interdependent characters, allowing for the animation to be calculated correctly—and it does the job quite speedily.

Overall, Motion Builder contributes a significant number of character animation tools which allow a small animation crew to create large amounts of character animation. It may seem a bit expensive (around \$4,200 node-locked or \$4,800 floating) considering that a great deal of the animation can be done in the 3D program of choice. But these days it doesn't come down to *what* can be accomplished anymore—it's all about how *efficiently* the job can be accomplished. I believe, from what I've seen, that the tools can greatly increase the efficiency of any character animation pipeline.

Web address: www.autodesk.com

Price: \$4,195 (node-locked); \$4,795 (floating)



Adobe Production Studio

Since I've been around for a while, I've grown up with Adobe products. I've watched After Effects migrate from CoSa. I've seen Illustrator absorb and supplant Freehand. And I've witnessed Photoshop mature from the most sophisticated paint program on any platform to ... the most sophisticated paint program on any platform. This time around, Adobe has made the wisest maneuver since purchasing Macromedia. They have taken all of their premiere products and bundled them into a package that provides

is moseying through his edit, adjusting in and out points and other editorial chores. Meanwhile, a compositor is choking a matte in his composite. The Premiere edit reads the composite as a file, and so it will update without the editor needing to resort to human interaction and ask the compositor if he is done.

This kind of cross-program interactivity is bolstered by Adobe Bridge, a robust file management system and browser. Through Bridge, you can first and foremost browse through image files on your system with thumbnails generated for each. Not such a big deal, you might think. But, you can also read and generate metadata in the files

created through XMP. Much like the data found in MP3 files such as artist, album, etc., (which Bridge recognizes), you can also store info such as camera data, history data, user notes, advanced technical data and keywords. All of these can be used with the search engine to make finding files quick and accurate.

Bridge also gives you tools and functionality

that tie the viewed images into the other programs in the suite. Images can be sent to Encore as assets or menus or whatnot. Groups of files can be batch renamed. You can run Photoshop batches on groups of

files, or open the files through any of the Adobe programs. It adds a great deal of organizational control for the users. My primary beef with it—and this opinion pertains to the whole suite—is that you should have the option to view sequences of files as one file name with a # padding nomenclature (filename_foo.####.jpg, for example).

I also have to add that all of the software within the production suite has been kicked up a notch or two or three. This isn't a surprise coming from Adobe, which seems to be pretty adept at maintaining its product. There is, however, one Premiere tool that must be mentioned.

Thanks to this new addition, users can now save a media file of their cut embedded into a PDF file for e-mailing or posting for clients. Clients can then make notes and save them back as a XFDF file. The user can load that file back into Premiere and the notes show up in the timeline in context. This feature alone can save users the cost of the production bundle in miscommunicated notes (or instances when the client comes back and says he never asked for the aforementioned change!)

If we had more room, I'd mention all the goodies that this outstanding Suite has to offer. Just know that this product is certainly worth purchasing if you don't have it already—and more so, if you already use the tools in production and are ready for an upgrade.

Website: www.adobe.com/creativesuite/main.html

Price: \$1,699; **Adobe Video Bundle, including Macromedia Flash Professional 8 software:** \$2,099

Razer Pro|Solutions' Pro|Click v. 1.6

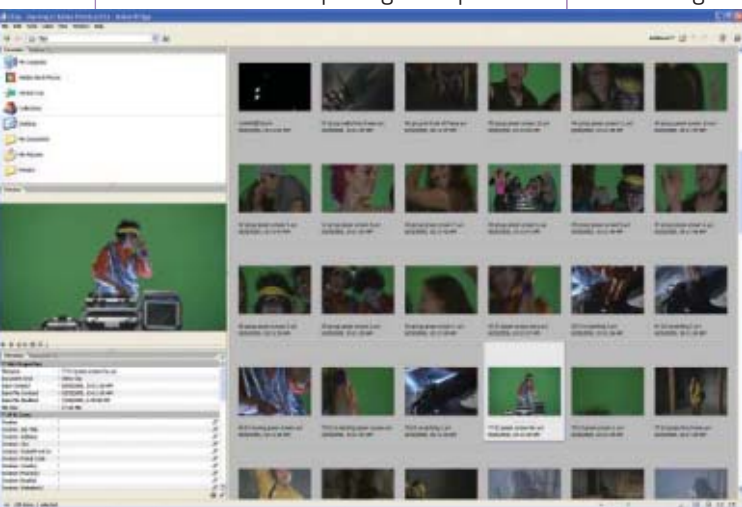
When I first received the Razer mouse to review, I thought "this is a mouse ... how much more advanced can a mouse get? How much more productive could I possibly be with a different kind of mouse?" When I looked at it further, it dawned on me that I could be much more productive.

Let's first look at the cool factors of the Razer. Nice, sleek design. Long buttons



which run the length of the fingers (at least mine). And an ultramarine blue internal light to illuminate the middle wheel and the shark-like gills running down the sides and the buttons on either side—yes, buttons

continued on page 43



the professional media artist all the tools necessary to create literally anything that may pop into his mind.

Now, you may say "Hey, don't a lot of companies do that?" And I'd reply, "Yes, they do." However, Adobe took the next step. They not only put all of the manuals into the same attractive box set, they have revamped the interfaces of the software so that they resemble one another and function much in the same way, which effectively lowers the slope of the learning curve. They've also taught the software to speak to each other so that After Effects compositions can live inside of a Premiere edit, for example, without pre-rendering. Imagine a world, if you will, where an editor





within the rigging that could scale facial features and body parts. An animator could grow limbs, broaden smiles, shrink ears and widen eyes interactively with the director, get approval on the look, and then give the other animators the new standard character.

"By making it possible to do small adjustments in anima-

tion land, we didn't have to send the characters all the way back to modeling and re-rigging," says character setup Jeremie Talbot. "The rig allowed the animators to jiggle the model in ways they couldn't with blend shapes."

For the props and accessories, the modelers created separate pieces that easily attached to the characters because they incorporated the model parts. The marmot's backpack, for example, which attached to its spine and shoulders, had the marmot's spine and shoulder modeled into it. The parts didn't replace those already built into the character; the mirrored parts were constrained to the base model. "We had nodes in the backpack that attached to nodes in the character so the backpack would be attached directly," says Talbot. "If the character moved his shoulder, the shoulder in the backpack would also move." Similarly, when the backpack needed to move with the marmot's hips, the riggers would attach it using the same technique. In addition, the animators could adjust the thickness and width of the backpack straps.

The backpack wasn't the only plug and play prop; the crew also created a flight helmet with floppy leather straps, a winter hat with earpieces, an investigator's cap, a scarf for the bear and pouches filled

Cause & Effect

Melts in Your Eyes!

Tippett Studio creates warm and fuzzy chocolate characters for Milka commercials. **by Barbara Robertson**

VISUAL EFFECTS

Why is chocolate so sweet and delicious? Because it's made by cute marmots in the Austrian Alps. If you didn't know that, you haven't been watching the Milka spots created by Tippett Studio for Frankfurt's Ogilvy & Mather and its client, Kraft Foods.

In a series of four 30-second spots directed by Frank Petzold, the crews at Tippett have mastered the art of chocolate delivery via marmot. Their marmot has transported the chocolate while riding on the back of a bear that slides down the mountain past a young couple on a hayride. He has flown in while hanging onto the feet of an eagle. He has hidden chocolate bunnies for Easter, and in a spot that will air at Christmas, placed chocolate Santas near a cabin door.

"It was a lot of fun working on these commercials because the characters were so happy—happy animals creating happy

chocolate and finding great ways to deliver it," says Will Groebe, lead animator. "But it's very difficult, technical work. They're always wearing a lot of stuff—hats and sacks of chocolate that they're interacting with, and they're interacting with each other. It wasn't just 'Bang out the animation.' It was 'Whoa! There's a lot of stuff going on.' Some shots have four characters. And, they're furred."

Groebe helped design the animals, which needed to look real but also warm, fuzzy and cartoony, by painting on photographs in PhotoShop. Eyes grew bigger, the eagle's serious expression changed into a smile, the bear's teeth shrank and the marmot's paws became hands.

Even so, the client continued to adjust the balance between realism and cartoon. Thus, knowing that the client might ask for shape changes even after the models were built, the team decided to add controls

with additional props: chocolate bars and bunnies.

"Because we created all the props separately, the director could say that he wanted more chocolate in the backpack, which was often the case," says Talbot, "and an animator could add as much as he wanted."

Animators could render the scenes without fur on the animals to check the animation and then hand the scenes to TDs (technical directors) who would add fur and lights. "Sometimes, once we'd see the fur, we'd see actions we didn't see before," Groebe says, "and we'd have to fix the animation."

Tippett uses the proprietary fur tool called Furocious. In Maya, the TDs see guide hairs that they shape into a hairstyle. To control the characteristics of the fur—how scraggly it is, the color, how the colors change over the length of the fur and so forth—they used painted texture maps and parameters. As the fur tool runs, it applies these attributes to the thousands of hairs interpolated from the

guide hairs that coat the character.

Lighting the fur was particularly critical and Tippett tested its global illumination (GI) toolset for the first time on these characters. On location, they took bracketed fisheye photographs of the environments and used them to build high definition range diffuse environment maps. "If a character is walking across a green meadow, we want the parts near the green to reflect the color in a broad, diffuse way," says lead technical director Charles Rose. "Before, we did that using lights under the ground. We'd dial a color in and have it fall off as it got higher on a character. But those lights always come from specific positions and even though you may not be able to verbalize what looks wrong, you know it doesn't look right." With GI, the TDs apply diffuse light using data gathered by bouncing digital light rays into the entire environment. The lighters also used RenderMan's deep shadows for the fur, which cause the light to fall off as it moves through the pelt.

Calculating the specular light to high-

light the fur properly was a special challenge. Too much specular and the bear looked oily and the marmot looked sweaty. "If you want characters to look warm and fuzzy, you need the right specular," says Rose. "It's not hard to know where to place lights to get highlights on a hard shiny surface, but because fur is just curves that simulate pieces of cylindrical hair, placing lights to get the specular right is not always intuitive." To test light placement, they would sometimes fly lights in a big circle around a character over a few hundred frames.

Rather than simply using Maya's dynamics on the guide hairs to make the fur look like it was blowing in the wind, the TDs baked out the dynamics pass and used it to generate animated texture maps that affected the entire body of hair. "It's a slow and iterative process, but we got a better effect," says Rose.

Animators did all the animation by hand except for such environmental effects as, in the first spot, particle-driven flower bits and pieces of grass tossed up as the bear

slid downhill. "We didn't have time to set up rigs for effects-driven animation," Groebe says. On a larger show, we'd definitely want help, but because it's such a fast turnaround, we were able to do some testing on our character rigs and the fur tool. There are a lot of really nice things that come up for short shows. We could do big, happy facial expressions and go overboard a bit on the animation, which we don't always get to do. It was fun stuff." Ssssss-weeeet, indeed. ■

Barbara Robertson is an award-winning journalist who specializes in visual effects and computer animation. If you have any cool tips for her, you can e-mail her at brobertson@animationmagazine.net.



Digital Magic

Radium makes Target flip for CG ads...
and the real scoop on those conga-dancing snots!

by Chris Grove

Now that Wal-Mart is, shall we say, borrowing a page from the highly effective lifestyle/image campaigns of Target with its *Look Beyond the Basics* ads, Target has switched course and launched a series of fully CGI TV spots.

The first in a series of five commercials began airing earlier this spring. Created entirely by visual effects and animation house Radium and directed by Steve "Spaz" Williams (for Minneapolis based agency Peterson Milla Hooks), *Product People* features store products that merge with each other to form dancing characters at a party. "We wanted the spots to feel like *Rent* in outer space," says Aladino Debert, Radium lead artist and head of CG. "It's a rich concept that opens up all sorts of possibilities."

Proving once again that there's always life in the hoary technique of motion-capture, the production process began with the filming of live-action dancers choreographed by Travis Payne (*Coyote Ugly*, *The Ten Commandments* musical). That footage was rough cut and used as a source for the CG team. In the final spot (see radium.com/work/work.php#), store products such as hardware, grocery items, cosmetics and sports gear dance on a set branded with Target's signature red color. "It was important that the products interacted and formed into characters in a logical way and weren't just flying through the air and randomly merging," says creative director Jonathan Keeton. "We wanted the animation to be highly articulated."

The increasing use of CG-heavy commercials is bad news for actors, whose presence in commercials seems to decline every year. However it's hard to imagine any thespian, no matter how starving, would object to the use of CG in a new Mucinex spot. Would you really want credit for playing a conga-dancing piece of mucus?

In the *Dance to the Mucus* spot made for Adams Respiratory Therapeutics, Mr. Mucus and his friends start a conga line in a cold sufferer's sinuses, causing pressure and

congestion. None too surprisingly, the drug is the hero of the spot and kicks the offenders out. "(It was our policy to use the latest CG technology with traditional animation to get what the client was looking for," says director Paul Demeyer (see kachew.com/clients/mucinexconga/Mucinex_Conga-240.mov). The spot begins and ends with live actors, with the snot-nosed CG characters sandwiched in between. Hollywood-based ka-chew! was the project's production house.

In another milestone, of sorts, veteran game developer Atari has announced that it's bringing an updated version of its classic *Alone In The Dark* vid game to the marketplace.

Fourteen years ago, the first *Alone in the Dark* title for PC helped usher in a new era of gaming, revolutionizing the use of fear as a tool to manipulate and engage the emotions of the player. And, says a company flack sheet, "bringing sheer terror to gamers around the world." Now Atari is bringing the franchise back to the PC as well offering an Xbox 360 version. "(We're) returning to the format that launched survival gaming," says Steve Tucker, director of marketing, Atari, Inc. "We anticipate that the title will again take the lead on next-generation consoles with the Xbox 360 and PC. This is one for gamers to keep an eye on in the coming months as Atari and Eden begin to reveal details that will demonstrate how we will fulfill these promises."

Developed by Eden Games, the newest



Product People



Dance to the Mucus

iteration of *Alone* promises a heart-stopping survival experience coupled with state-of-the-art real-time physics and advanced environmental interaction to deliver an action-orientated experience in a detailed, open environment. Boasting an original game-play structure designed to appeal to a mass audience, the newest version aims to go beyond expectations for a next-generation title and, says Tucker, re-establish itself as the genre-leader on the Windows platform and Xbox 360.

As the animation, CGI and visual effects industry matures, it's less about the software you're using than what you're able to do with it. Case in point: the creative minds at Big Spaceship who are constantly finding new and more interesting ways to use Adobe's line of classic tools—After Effects, Illustrator CS2, InDesign CS2, Photoshop and



Alone in the Dark

Macromedia's Flash.

Big Spaceship is most well known for its clever interactive websites for movies such as *War of the Worlds*, and *The Grudge*—a creepy site that “kills” you if you stay on it long enough. Another innovative project is Oceanic Airlines, part of an extensive online campaign for ABC's *Lost*. Visitors can book and track flights, as well as browse Oceanic Airlines' *In Flight* magazine. Most recently,

the company developed an interactive site for the Sony Pictures' cult fave, *Underworld: Evolution*. It's a cross-promotional online gaming environment that still receives thousands of hits even after the theatrical release. The agency's media- and platform-agnostic work calls for strong design and motion graphics animation tools—After Effects, Illustrator, and Photoshop and Flash.

“We see ourselves as the type of agency

that, while rare today, will be prevalent in five years. We aren't a traditional web creative firm, and we're not a big ad agency driving print, broadcast, and web advertising,” says co-founder Michael Lebowitz. “It's great to see the ‘net realizing its potential as a wide-scale distribution channel and to be part of this transformation. We had a head start thanks to our background in early broadband development.”

Lebowitz and the firm's other co-founder Dan Federman describe Adobe software as their “bread and butter.” The Big Spaceship team creates client proposals using Adobe InDesign CS2. Project designs start in Illustrator CS2 or Photoshop CS2. “The smart objects feature in Photoshop CS2, in particular, is amazing,” says Federman. “The ability to seamlessly incorporate vector information that ties back to an independent Illustrator file is huge in terms of our ability to combine different types of imagery.” ■

Chris Grove is a Los Angeles-based journalist and actor. If you have hot tips for Chris, you can email him at edit@animationmagazine.net.

Tech Reviews

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on either side. Just looking down at it sitting on its customized, hard metal mouse pad, glowing its soft blue glow, makes you feel like you're in the 22nd century. But a blue glow doesn't make you more productive, and it certainly doesn't make you more popular with the opposite sex.

To enhance productivity, the Razer has not five buttons, but seven. The buttons cradled under your thumb and pinky are on rockers, creating two unique functions for each. Every button is entirely customizable by the user. The typical functions such as right-click, double-click, etc. are all there. In addition, the Razer provides you with built-in functions. For instance, you can set one of the rockers to adjust the sensitivity of the mouse optical resolution on the fly. This would give you ability to whip around the desktop at high speeds, but then gear down to a higher resolution for more sensitivity when your task requires more precision. You may also assign individual keystrokes to the buttons. And ... you can assign macros to a button. A sequence of up to eight keystrokes makes

up a macro.

The resolution of the mouse goes up to 1600 dpi, and if marketing is to be believed, this is the most sensitive mouse device out there. Further investigation reveals that laser mice are going up to 2000 dpi, but the Razer sits among the top of the opticals.

I like the feel of the mouse and the functionality. I would really like the custom buttons to expand their reach into each piece of software that you are running: Since



hotkeys vary from program to program, it would be really nice to have a button map that is unique to the program. The 3dConnexion SpacePilot has this functionality, so I know the technology exists. The mouse pad is rugged and nearly indestructible with little sticky feet to prevent slippage.

However, when I initially set the pad down while unpacking the product, the pad stuck so aggressively to the table I had to pry it off with a screwdriver. I'm not sure if that's by design, but someone may need to ease up on the adhesive.

Had I been looking for a new mouse, I probably would not have chosen the Razer. This is not because I don't like it—the opposite is true—I actually love it. However, this is not a product that you are going to find at Best Buy or Wal-Mart. In fact, the number of stores that do carry it is quite limited, by the company's own admission. So, I probably would not have run across it when Logitech bombards you with flashy ads and shiny mice. The price may be a little steep for most consumers (\$60 mouse, \$30 pad), but for professionals who don't blink at spending \$400 on a Wacom tablet, I hardly think that will be an issue.

Website: www.razerpro.com

Price: \$59.99 (RazerPro Mouse V1.6);

\$29.99 (for Pro Pad) ■

Todd Sheridan Perry is the co-owner and vfx supervisor for Max Ink Cafe and Max Ink Productions. You can email him at ducky@maxinkcafe.com.



Summit speakers and members of the community visit special technology break out rooms to hear students discuss their biomedical projects.

An Early Education

Gaming outreach programs target high school students.

by Ellen Wolff

When you think of the game industry's outreach programs for schools, you probably picture college students—the ones who'll be entering the job market soon. But the reach goes deeper than that, as evidenced by those who've been participating in career summits held at McKinley Technology High School, a public school in Washington, DC. The list of companies who've been speaking to McKinley students include Electronic Arts, Firaxis and Vicon, and they've been joined in these summits by game education experts from colleges like Full Sail, University of Southern California, Carnegie Mellon and DeVry. The goal of these summits, according to McKinley's Rick Kelsey, "is to help our students understand what the hot technology careers will be five or 10 years down the road."

There was no shortage of opinions offered at McKinley's spring summit. "They had a room full of speakers," recalls Rob Catto, program director for game design and development at Full Sail, a summit sponsor. Catto spoke about the opportunities—and hurdles—facing any student who's envisioning a game career.

"This generation is very good at playing games, but unfortunately they all want to be game designers, and very few of those positions are available. It's like movies, where everybody wants to be a director!" He outlines three tracks that students can take to get their foot in the door: "The artist track, where you're a concept artist, modeler, rigger, animator or lighter. Or you're a programmer, or



McKinley student Meghan Kyle puts on the mo-cap glitz for summit attendees.

you become a tester at a game company and then become a manager of testers."

Catto wasn't surprised that big game companies and prominent colleges have responded to a program like McKinley's, which is unique in its commitment to a game technology curriculum. Open since 2004, McKinley currently has 200 students in its ten-semester interactive media track. An additional 200 students, age nine to 18 from across the D.C. area, go to McKinley every Saturday for 20 weeks and pay to participate in The Institute of Urban Game Design. That program teaches Flash, Maya, game theory and motion-capture. (Thanks to Vicon, McKinley became the first high school in the country to have a motion-capture studio.)

"There's this really cool mixture of African Americans and white geeks," says Kelsey. "Their common bond is that they love gaming." McKinley is also defying the conventional wisdom that this field only attracts guys. Among the next graduates of the school's interactive media program, the school expects 110 girls.

"What we're trying to promote is that this is not *only* about becoming a game developer," says Kelsey. "The students should look at all the information technology that they're learning." Even in an urban high school where many students arrive without keyboarding skills or solid math backgrounds, Kelsey believes, "Once they learn programming they can go in many different directions. They shouldn't be afraid of going on to col-



Instructor James Tolbert (seated) gives students Sulimah Silah (left) and James Tyler a mo-cap technology tour.

After the summit speakers have finished, students show off their recent Maya work in McKinley's 3D Animation Mac Lab.



lege and specializing in networking or systems engineering. Our overall philosophy is that if we show our students that they're doing college level work, how could they *not* think that they're ready for college? In animation classes we're teaching Maya. We didn't tell them that's a college-level program, and they're all doing fine!"

Kelsey is actively pursuing relationships with companies and colleges to expand opportunities for McKinley stu-

dents. "This summer, 90 juniors will go to DeVry's D.C.-area campus, and game companies will work with them there. Four of our students will receive scholarships from EA to study at USC's Integrated Media Systems Center. They'll go to EA every Friday and work on a project with game professionals."

Carnegie Mellon also has an ongoing relationship with McKinley and is offering ten internships this

summer. Since McKinley students use a CMU-developed 2D programming tool called Alice, they will benefit from a recently announced collaboration between EA and CMU. As Kelsey explains, "EA is looking to do something with their Sims characters and they've partnered with CMU to apply the next version of Alice. It will use the Sims characters and environments, and McKinley will do the student testing."

These kinds of real-world experiences

are absolutely vital in teaching students how to work on a team and behave professionally, notes Rob Catto. While such a project-oriented approach is standard practice at Full Sail, it's all too rare at the high school level. To support McKinley's program, Full Sail's summit sponsorship will go toward purchasing new audio/video equipment for the school.

"Students need to know that it takes more than learning the latest cool technology to land their dream jobs," observes Catto. "They need to learn *how* to learn and be prepared to teach themselves technologies that will keep changing all the time. In other words, life learning skills."

Kelsey agrees and is hopeful that more experts like Catto will come to future McKinley summits, which will be held every three months. He also hopes McKinley will become a model for other inner city schools, but he admits with a smile, "It's still a big experiment!" ■

Ellen Wolff is a Los Angeles-based journalist who specializes in animation, visual effects and higher education.

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Images from "Northville" by Chansu Kim

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Brian Lemay

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at Seneca College

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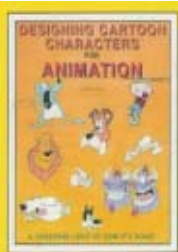
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| Event | Date | Place | Website |
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| fmx/06 | May 3-6 | Stuttgart, Germany | www.fmx.de |
| Barcelona Negocios & Franquicias (BNF) International Franchise and Licences Fair | May 4-6 | Barcelona, Spain | www.firabcn.es |
| Int'l Short Film Festival Oberhausen | May 4-9 | Germany | www.kurzfilmtage.de |
| AniFest | May 4-10 | Trebon, Czech Rep. | www.anifest.cz |
| LepreCon 32 | May 5-7 | Phoenix, AZ | www.leprecon.org |
| PROMAX&BDA Europe | May 8-9 | Vienna, Austria | http://www.promax.tv |
| Kid Power | May 9-10 | Lake Buena Vista, FL | www.kidpowerx.com |
| E3 2006 | May 10-12 | Los Angeles | www.e3expo.com |
| Seoul Net Festival | May 15-Sept. 24 | Seoul, Korea | www.senef.net |
| Cannes Film Festival | May 17-28 | Cannes, France | www.festival-cannes.org/cinefondation |
| 120th AES Convention (Paris) | May 20-23 | Paris, France | http://www.aes.org/events/120/ |
| Anime Boston | May 26-28 | Boston, MA | www.animeboston.com |
| Zlin Fest for Children and Youth | May 28-June 3 | Zlin, Czech Rep. | www.zlinfest.cz |
| Digital Media Festival | June 1-3 | Melbourne, Australia | www.dmw.com.au |
| Vision Fest | June 1-4 | 3 Locations | www.visionfest.org |
| Wizard Wold Philadelphia | June 2-4 | Philadelphia, PA | www.wizarduniverse.com |
| Brooklyn Int'l Film Festival | June 2-11 | Brooklyn, NY | http://wbff.org/submit |
| onedotzero | June 2-11 | London, U.K. | www.onedotzero.com |



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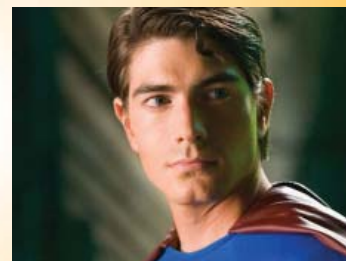
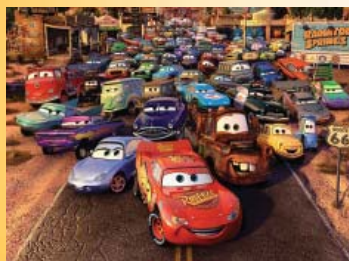
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Just in time for E3, **Emmanuel Valdez**, the chief creative officer at Carlsbad, Calif.-based **High Moon Studios** invited us to share the magical carpet ride that is his daily life. High Moon has close to 100 developers, with multiple teams working on the *Darkwatch* game as well as other hush-hush projects in development for next-gen consoles. For more info, visit www.highmoonstudios.com.



Once Emmanuel transforms into Darkwatch Man, there's no going back—or putting on those boring office clothes.



Here is a rare look inside the walls of the studio—a holy place where games are born, careers are made and all selfish demands are ignored, unless they're made by Jessica Alba.



Emmanuel Valdez, who helped design the studio interior, has a supernatural way of harnessing the building's special energy.



Darkwatch Man is proud of sharing his magnificent physique with the artistic types taking High Moon's weekly life drawing classes.



We work in Carlsbad, which means we tame the wild waves during our lunch breaks.



Returning to work after lunchtime surf sessions has dire side effects.



Emmanuel uses his alter-ego Darkwatch Man to cut in line in front of his colleagues and get his daily gaming fix.



Emmanuel tries to stay up on the latest and greatest games on the market, regardless of its mental consequences.



Emmanuel's daughter Velana Valdez shows Darkwatch Man who really controls his superpowers at home.

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